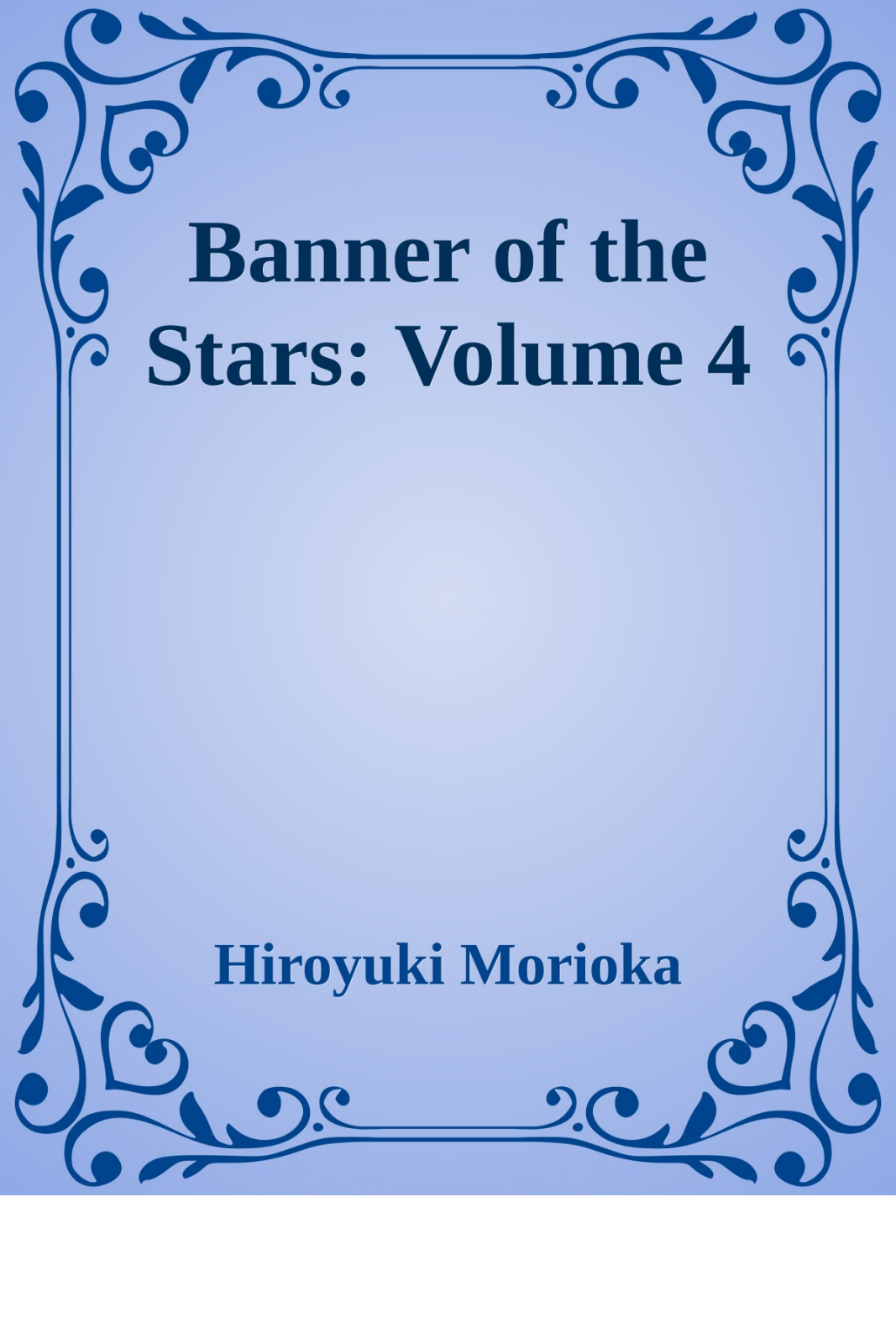




Banner of the Stars: Volume 4

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Welcome Back to the Abh Empire!

Welcome “back”?

Yes - to fully enjoy *BANNER OF THE STARS*, you need to read the three-volume *CREST OF THE STARS* first. (It’s out in print omnibus form!) It explains the ins and outs of the fictional future author MORIOKA Hiroyuki has crafted, as well as our protagonists’ backgrounds and shared bond. More to the point, it’s a great story, and worth your time.

For those of you who have read *CREST*, but would like a refresher:

Whenever a vocab word of the Abh language “Baronh” appears, it will be in *italics* (with the English meaning in parentheses). Whenever that particular word appears again past the first time in the original text, it will be replaced with its English-meaning counterpart in **bold** (but won’t be bolded if the word didn’t have the Baronh for it next to it in the original text). This is to make sure the book is accessible without losing some of that lovely “conlang” (constructed language) flavor! That being said, if a Baronh word has already been introduced in the English version of *CREST*, it won’t be reintroduced in *BANNER*. This translation assumes you have read *CREST*.

Baronh words are spelled weirdly. The character whose English-language spelling is “Lafier” is spelled *Lamhirh* in Baronh (“mh” makes an “f” sound, and the “rh” is actually a rolling “r”). *Ghintec*, meanwhile, is pronounced “Jint” (as the “c” and “ec” at the ends of many nouns are silent). This translation will largely be making use of accessibility spellings for character names. Having to constantly remind oneself “*Lamhirh*” is pronounced LAFEERR would probably prove a tad immersion-breaking for some readers.

Banner of the Stars is ongoing as of the time of this writing (its sixth volume having been released in 2018), and according to MORIOKA, *CREST* was something of an introductory primer to this, the “story proper.” For the most part, each volume of *BANNER* is its own episode, a snapshot in the lives of our protagonists at a certain point in the grueling decades of galactic warfare. As such, please know that unlike the individual volumes of *CREST*, Volumes I-III of *BANNER* are *self-contained stories* in addition to being a part of an overarching saga. Pick up and read this omnibus at your leisure!

We join our protagonists three years after the main events of *CREST*, in the year 955 I.H. (Imperial History)...

“To walk the same ground from cradle to grave:” an idiom, meaning “to live a happy life.”

“When personnel commissioners come to your parent’s funeral:” an idiom, meaning “compounding misfortunes.”

“Wearing a blue wig:” an insult, used to denigrate those who leave a planet’s surface because they prefer living in a spaceship or orbital facility. Also used to express antipathy toward federal agents who spend much of their time in space. Other times, the phrase is used to mean “an unsound mind.” It derives from how the Abh, the spacefaring race, have blue hair.

—Excerpted from the Hania Federation Dictionary of Idioms,
published by Mintsin

BANNER OF THE STARS IV: The Screech of Space-Time

Synopsis of BANNER OF THE STARS III

Aboard the lightly-armored cargo passenger ship *Baucbiruch*, Jint and Lafier were heading for the Hyde Star System, from which the Three Nations Alliance had retreated, so that Jint could formally reign over it as Count. Yet the landworld administration of the planet Martin, Jint's homeworld, refused to concede to the Empire, and declared independence. Jint attempted to persuade his surrogate father and Hyde's head of government, Till Corint, but failed, causing him to be estranged from his family once again.

Characters

Lafier

...Ship Commander of the raid ship *Flicaubh*. Granddaughter of the Empress of the Abh Empire, and a Vice Hecto-Commander.

Jint

...Lafier's clerk. The Count of Hyde, and a quartermaster vanguard starpilot.

Ecryua

...Lafier's Vice Captain and Navigator. A Deca-Commander.

Grinshia

...Lafier's Inspector Supervisor. A Mechanics Deca-Commander.

Yatesh

...Lafier's Communications Officer. A rearguard starpilot.

Arbohf

...Lafier's Gunner. A vanguard starpilot.

G'nohmbohsh

...Lafier's Messenger. A linewing starpilot.

Duhier

...The Deputy Communications Officer of the battle-line ship *Caïsaumh*. Lafier's younger brother. A linewing starpilot.

Behrsoht

...Duhier's Ship Commander.

Vohnyuh

...Duhier's Senior Communications Officer. A vanguard starpilot.

Atosryua

...Commandant of Trample-Blitz Squadron 1. A Kilo-Commander.

Sobash

...Atosryua's Senior Staff Officer. A Hecto-Commander.

Cohtponee

...Fleet Commander-in-Chief. An admiral.

Lamazh

...The Empress. Twenty-Seventh Ruler of the Abh Empire.

Brahsh

...Chancellor of the Abh Empire.

Bahrohz

...Councilor of the Abh Empire Ambassadorial Agency.

Faramunsh

...Imperial Admiral of the Abh Empire.

Teen Quihahn

...Hania Federation Ambassador.

Samson

...Main Retainer of the House of Hyde.

Prologue

How many times has it been? How many funerals have I had to attend, and how many more must I in the future?

So wondered the twenty-seventh **Emperor** of the **Humankind Empire of Abh**, *Abliarsec Néic Dubreusr Dreuc Abliarser Lamagh*. She was aboard the **Star Forces Flagship-cum-Imperial Empress's Ship**, the *Gaftnohec*, which was making for the *Rüé Ibéic* (Imperial Mortuary Hall) in the **capital** of *Lacmhacarh* at extremely low speeds.

While in empires past, the so-called “emperor’s ship” may have steered clear of warzones, in this, the **Humankind Empire of Abh**, it was constructed with battle readiness in mind. As such, it was traditional to assign a state-of-the-art **patrol ship** to the Emperor or Empress. That was why the *Gaftnohec* was now a *Caü*-class patrol ship, which had the specifications for a fleet flag ship — only this patrol ship had a **Jade Throne** in place of the **Commander-in-Chief's Seat**.

The **Empress's** personal quarters aboard ship were officially the *chicrh ghaharérr* (commander-in-chief's room). She couldn't speak for other militaries, but within the **Imperial Star Forces** at the very least, it was the most spacious and luxurious space a **soldier** could expect in the field of battle. Her quarters were elaborately decorated, but not to the degree that it stood out, relatively speaking. In fact, considering this was where the sovereign of the empire of one trillion subjects went to unwind, it was positively gloomy and austere. Yet to her, the room felt like a paradise. Being **Empress** was exhausting work, especially during wartime. Any place she could spend some time by herself was precious.

She'd be even more pleased if she could go unmolested by urgent reports, but alas, that was too much to hope for. Subtle floor vibrations told her they had moored alongside their destination. *Lamagh* put down her bluish cup and rose to her feet.

The door opened, and there stood a **personal transporter** and several **chamberlains**.

“**Your Majesty**,” said the **Head Chamberlain**, with a reverential bow of the head.

Lamagh returned the gesture of respect with a nod and mounted the transporter. Thus was she forced to put her paradise behind her.

The transporter moved smoothly down the hall, the walls

depicting a pleasant prairie. One **honor guard** NCC was stationed every one thousand *dagh* in order to present arms.

Lamagh was back on her earlier train of thought: *Somewhere in planar space, a funeral might be happening right now. A funeral without a mortuary hall. The warships of the Star Forces are the best possible coffins in the soldiers' eyes, no matter how old or beat-up they become. Some may regard the fact they must share their coffin with others a fly in the amber, but they're a minority. After all, most view getting to share their coffin with family a reason to rejoice. And I doubt anyone would object to the notion that the people they encounter on a ship can be counted as family. We don't need some overblown sealing of vows; boarding a ship means living and dying alongside the rest of the crew and passengers — especially in times of war.*

And this was an era of war. Even now, all throughout **planar space**, fleets from both sides were laying into each other, and countless rousing death rites were being conducted.

This was the biggest of all the many funerary halls that floated through space in *Lacmhacarh*, the *BirauteC Carsarr Gereulacr* (Capital of the Kin of the Stars) — and the biggest in all the Empire. Aside from those who had received imperial sanction, only the members of the Imperial Family, or “**Imperials**,” could use the Imperial Mortuary Hall.

The Abh were areligious, but they did observe the occasional ceremony that had a touch of spirituality to it, and funerals were the prime example. The funerals of pious land peoples were much simpler, on the whole.

However, Abh funerals were not truly “religious.” Abh mourning admitted no intervening god or gods. They were farewell ceremonies, meant solely for those who knew the deceased.

At last, the **transporter** passed through the lock gate of the *Gaftnohec*, and into the funeral hall. Its main hallway was vividly arrayed with images of the stars. The Abh may have been partial to art of planetary-surface nature for decorating ships' interiors, but they believed the celestial fabric more fitting for the dearly departed.

By the opened door stood a handful of people, who, upon seeing *Lamagh*, bowed from the waist. A **starpilot** with blue-brown hair stepped forward from among them. His rank insignia showed him to be an **associate commodore**. He was *Chidoryac Baurgh SideC Sørh*, the day's chief mourner.

“I'm honored **Your Majesty** has graced us,” he greeted.

“It's just a pity it's under these circumstances,” she replied. “We would not dream of missing the funeral of Our right hand.”

“I'm sure my father would be delighted to hear those words.”

“We aren't so sure,” she smiled, stepping off the **transporter**.

Chidoryac's father was named *Chidoryac Baurgh Sidec Chidh*. Until very recently, he had served as the **Imperial Chancellor**. Not one to attach much importance to the concept of taking breaks, he tended to frown upon time spent unproductively — even if the one doing so was the **Empress** herself.

Knowing the man, he'd probably think the Abh Empress ought to be too ruthless to be wasting her time reminiscing about the dead.

But she also knew that even he hadn't been able to resist the urge to devote himself to his flowerbeds from time to time.

The venue was circular, and at its center lay the coffin of the *Bauchimh Raica* (Former Chancellor). *Lamagh* kicked off the floor; the gravity control wasn't on. With the practiced poise of an Abh, she flew to the casket's side. Cylindrical in shape, the transparent coffin cradled the man who was Chancellor. He looked no different from how he had before.

Lamagh said her goodbyes, before allowing the next attendee to say theirs. This place was special; even the Empress was paid no higher respect than any other. It would not do for the center of attention to be someone other than the deceased.

She found her seat, hooking her toes onto a protrusion on the floor to prevent herself from floating up and away.

Fretfully, a Lander came closer through the use of a *sryrec* (glide-aid). There were quite a few Landers at the venue — the Former Chancellor himself was from a **landworld**, and many among the bureaucrats who were his subordinates lacked the gene for blue hair. That being said, this man was not a citizen of the Empire, either; he was Teen Quihahn, Ambassador of the Hania Federation.

"Your Majesty." Teen attempted to land near *Lamagh*. He moved fairly deftly, for a Lander.

However, a *nacébiac* (chamberlain guard) casually stepped in the way, hand firmly on the grip of a **lightgun**, to prevent Teen from getting too near.

"We thank you for showing up for Our vassal's sake, Mr. Ambassador," said *Lamagh* tersely.

"It's no trouble. His Excellency was a friend of mine, and one whom I respected greatly," he said, his voice dripping with heartache. If he was acting, he was a masterful performer. "I don't deserve such thanks."

"Is that so? Then instead of thanks, We offer you Our condolences."

"I am much obliged." Teen bowed deeply, causing him to trip a little. "Also, please forgive me, Your Majesty, but could you possibly spare me a little of your time later?"

It seemed this was the real reason he'd come to her. If he wanted

someone to talk about his late friend with, there were definitely more suitable conversation partners than her.

"We're afraid this isn't the time," she stated coldly. "We would be quite pleased if you could refrain."

"I humbly beg Your Majesty's pardon, but I implore you. It is for the sakes of both our nations," he said, refusing to back down.

"Those are matters to discuss with the **Chancellor**." The former Chancellor's death may have been sudden, but the appointment of the new one had been conducted without delay. The *Üalodh Gaicer Scofarimér* (Ambassadorial Agency Director), Brahsh, had been promoted to the role.

The **Ambassadorial Agency** was the government office in charge of diplomacy, but there was only one nation with which the Empire had relations. As such, they ought by all means to know the Hania Federation in and out.

"Regrettably, it appears **His Excellency the Chancellor** won't lend an ear to a petty official."

"Is that so? For according to the reports We've received, the **Chancellor** has taken quite an amount of time for you."

"Yes, he has. But time is all he has given me," he griped.

"There was no guarantee you would get the results you wanted."

"True, Your Majesty, but..."

"We may be **Empress**," she admonished, "but We hesitate to intrude upon the duties of Our retainers. And We would be pleased if you took that into account."

"I have taken it into account, but I implore Your Majesty all the same."

The **chamberlain guard** gave her a look: *Do you want me to shoo him off?*

Lamagh answered with a gesture of the finger: *This is nothing*. The gesture was so subtle, Teen likely didn't notice.

"If you don't mind conversing on your feet, then We shall allow it this once."

"Thank you, Your Majesty. I am delighted to hear that."

"However, you had best not misconstrue this as your having been granted a new privilege."

"I understand." Teen glanced at the **chamberlain guard**. "Now then, I believe I should give this space to someone better suited than I."

Lamagh had to hold down the urge to say *That would be best*. "Very well. Later, after the funeral is over, We shall take you to the ship on Our **transporter**."

For a fleeting moment, he was silent. He was probably less than pleased how brief that was. The Ambassadorial Agency was in the

Imperial Palace. They could have returned there together on the *Gaftnochec*, which would give him adequate time to talk to her. Yet the **Empress** had no intention of extending the Ambassador such special treatment.

If he was as displeased as *Lamagh* surmised, Teen didn't show it. "It would be my honor. I am most grateful, **Your Majesty.**"

Even as the two spoke, more mourners were paying their respects. By the time the number of people by the casket had grown sparse, some voices were ringing out. Those voices weren't saying anything; they started off as quiet moaning. *Lamagh*, too, added her voice, laced with grief, to the chorus.

When no one else was leaping toward the casket, the moaning wrapped the hall like an undulating wave. What had started as a handful of disconnected voices had become a lovely harmony.

This was the *Bar cicoth* (Abh elegy) — a song to send off a fellow Abh in beautiful fashion. Among **landworlders**, there were many who wished to be interred in the soil of their home planets. *Chidoryac Baurgh Sidec Chidh* was not one of them. He had chosen to be regarded as an Abh even during the ceremony that would cap off his life, and the **Empire** obliged him with the greatest esteem. Indeed, this mortuary hall was for national-level funerals, and even among **Imperials**, not all had their funerals conducted here.

As the elegy reverberated through the hall, a shining black cylinder descended and covered the transparent coffin. This was the shell that would shelter the **Former Chancellor's** corpse for several hundreds of millions of years. Once the coffin was completely encased, the cylinder rose up gradually, for loading into the **EM cannon**. The volume of the Abh elegy rose with it.

The coffin now loaded, the cannon breech closed, and the very next instant, the mortuary hall fired the casket toward the center of the galaxy. Its speed was reduced by the giant mass of the hall, creating a pleasant mock-gravity, which pulled everyone down. Their heels went THUD against the floor, their cue to quiet down the singing. The funeral had concluded.

Lamagh gazed at the closed cannon breech for a while. *How many more times must I watch this exact scene play out...?*

Then she kicked against the floor and flew toward the exit, where the Hanian Ambassador was waiting.

Chapter 1: *Tlachoth Úécr Sauder Cemarar* (Battle of the Kemar Portal-Sea)

“Five minutes until **space-time fusion**.”

Abliarsec Néic Dubreuscr Boerh Parhynr Lamhirh, the second-ever **Ship Commander** of the **raid ship** *Flicaubh*, nodded to signal she’d heard the announcement loud and clear.

The voice of Ecryua, the **Vice Captain-cum-Navigator**, echoed through the **bridge**. It sounded surprisingly calm, considering the space-times they were fusing with were those of the enemy’s **mobile space-time mines**.

“An **inter-bubble communication** from **Squadron Command**,” reported the **Communications Officer**, **Rearguard Starpilot** Yatesh. “It says, ‘switch over to single-ship **bubbles**. 1107.’”

“Send them the roger-that signal,” Lafier nodded. She checked the time on her **wristgear**. 1107 was the squadron’s standard time — 11:07.

The corps that the *Flicaubh* belonged to, **Trample-Blitz Squadron 1**, was currently four-ships-to-a-bubble, and charging against the thick **space-time particle** current emanating from the *Mugh Saudelacr Érucfar* (Central Disc Sector of Milky Way Portals).

“**Vice Captain**,” said Lafier, “**space-time splitting**, 1107.”

“How reckless,” she muttered, as she prepared for **splitting**.

Lafier agreed. Splitting into single-ship **bubbles** would increase their maneuverability, but it would weaken their defenses. They were forced to plunge into a barrage using a frailer formation.

“Can we just avoid them?” asked Ecryua. If they could, then they could make up for the lack of defenses with their newfound maneuverability.

“No,” said Lafier promptly. “If we dodge them, the reinforcements will have to deal with them.”

Trample-Blitz Squadron 1 was at the head of the **assault sub-fleet** *Bosurec*, with the four **assault squadrons** that were *Bosurec*’s principal forces in back.

Assault ships were weak to **mines**. Typically, a *saubh mésgér* (escort squadron), specializing in anti-mine defense, would be deployed in front of the **assault squadron**, but not this time. The

escort ships had taken heavy losses in the preceding battles, and it seemed the **command center**'s policy was to save them for later use.

In place of the usual ships, the raid ships of the **Trample-Blitz Squadron** and the **patrol ships** of the **Recon Squadron** would be their shield. Such was the *Glagamh Byrer's* (Fleet Command Center) strategy.

"**Splitting** in ten seconds," announced Ecryua. "Eight, seven, six, five..."

Lafier rose from the seat of the **Ship Commander** and drew forth the **control gauntlet**. The senses of the ship flowed into her through her **access-cable**, but she felt a strange unease from how she wasn't piloting. However, she would have to get used to this discomfort. Unless she got demoted, she wouldn't be steering a warship through her own **control gauntlet** ever again.

"Now **splitting**," said Ecryua, disinterestedly.

The four raid ships separated, each now at the center of their own pocket universes. With this, they had drastically reduced the time it'd take for the **mines** to make contact with them.

"**Fusion** in ninety-two seconds," stated Ecryua.

"Deploy the **magnetic shield**," said Lafier.

"Magnetic shield deployed. All clear," said the **Inspector Supervisor, Mechanics Deca-Commander** Grinshia.

"**Fusion** in sixty seconds."

"Set the mobile turrets to auto-firing mode; have them fire within a range of a hundred."

The sides of each raid ship sported countless **laser cannons**. Older **patrol ship** models had antiproton cannons, but they were lacking in power, so *Caubh*-class raid ships had only laser cannons as their mobile turrets.

"Setting mobile turrets to auto-firing mode. Firing range, within one hundred." The **Inspector Supervisor** was also in charge of the turrets; since they fired automatically, there was little need for human intervention. The most important thing was to make sure they were in proper working order. "Preparations complete. Safeties off on all gunports. Turret Clusters 1 to 8, all clear."

"**Fusion** in thirty seconds." Even Ecryua's voice was tinged with tension. Or perhaps that was just Lafier's imagination.

What Lafier wasn't imagining was the ardent gaze on her, courtesy of **Linewing Starpilot Gnomboch**. The young man's hair was a dark and reddish indigo blue.

Lafier knew what he wanted to say; she had served on a warship's bridge as a linewing herself, after all. Poor *Gnomboch* was dying to be given some task to do. He had been vested with the position of *clériac* (messenger). On a raid ship, a messenger was *roïtlaciac*, *roïdrociac*, and

roirilbigac (deputy gunner, deputy communications officer, and deputy navigator) — which was to say, he was a chore boy. His job description was piloting the **smallcraft**, but in practice, it was whichever **Flight Branch starpilot** was free who served as the smallcraft's **Skipper**. Plus, the smallcraft usually only took off when the warship was in anchorage someplace far from the zone of battle, where the Flight Branch starpilots had more time on their hands than they knew what to do with.

Moreover, the fact that the Flight Branch starpilots apart from the **Gunner** couldn't steer the ship with their own **control gauntlets** was a source of woe for them. Naturally, the opportunity to pilot didn't come to novice **starpilots** all too often, which meant *Gnomboch* was perpetually saddled with all of the odd jobs.

Lafier's little brother came to mind. He, too, was currently fighting somewhere here in the **planar** dimension, as a **linewing starpilot**.

Lafier decided to give him a job. "*Gnomboch*, I'm making the mobile turrets controllable from your **console**. Put your mind to your duties as **Deputy Gunner** for the remainder of the battle."

To be frank, manning the mobile turrets was something a child could do, and almost as sport. But it would make for some good experience for a novice like him. Besides, having nothing to do while aboard a warship engaged in combat was nerve-racking; fear would have free rein to harrow his heart.

"Thank y-..." But it seemed something inside *Gnomboch* didn't agree with saying thanks in such a scenario. "Roger that."

Lafier worked her console and granted a portion of its functionalities to *Gnomboch*'s. It took nary a moment, after which she probed the inside of the **space-time bubble** using her *frocragh*. A spot on the interior surface was already frothing — a sign of **fusion**. The mine was coming through.

She glanced at the **planar space map**. The enemy mines were expending every effort to stop the raid ship squadron. She wouldn't have it any other way; now they didn't need to go out of their way to find them.

"Three of them are **fusing**," said Ecryua. "...They're here."

Three **mines** came hurtling toward them almost simultaneously. Yet Lafier didn't move. There was no need just yet.

"Turret Clusters 2 and 3 have begun firing," reported *Gnomboch*, audibly nervous. "They're operating without incident."

"You said it without stammering!" teased the **Gunner**, *Arbaumh*, who had become his direct superior, albeit temporarily. "Way to go."

Gnomboch was clearly in no position to react to that jab; he kept glaring at the console in intense concentration.

It was the mobile turrets that took care of **mines**: they mowed them down automatically. While leaving it to the relatively weak **laser cannons** induced anxiety, firing the **EM cannons** — the main weapons of a raid ship — would be mostly pointless, since there was little chance their payload would hit the bull's-eye. As such, they had no choice but to bear the uncertainty.

The mines continually veered in their course as they rushed ever closer. The light beams fired from the turrets got solid beads on them, but the mines wouldn't go down from single hits. That was because **mobile space-time mines** were akin to unmanned, **planar space navigation-capable** ships in their own right.

The mine at the fore started flying in a straight line at uniform speed. Its control core must have been destroyed. At once, several dozen beams of light focused on it, and it shattered, dispersing its antimatter contents. The clump of antimatter reacted with normal matter, all the while maintaining its trajectory toward the *Flicaubh*. But it was no longer a threat; it had already mostly converted into energy, and when it did reach the hull, the remaining antiprotons would be deflected by the magnetic shielding.

The second of the three mines had also been destroyed and rendered harmless. But the third was still worthy of concern.

"Change course!" ordered Lafier. "Forty up, twenty-five left. Upon veering, all starboard thrusters at full throttle."

"Roger that."

The raid ship adjusted its bearings and began maintaining the distance between it and the mine. The mine was faster, of course; this was only buying them a tick or two of time. But that was all-important right now. The starboard turrets obtained the optimal firing position and focused their beams on the mine, which exploded.

"Another four, headed for us," said Ecryua.

There was no time to take a breath. That wasn't enough mines to saturate their little universe just yet.

The **mines** frequently and repeatedly accelerated and decelerated in order to evade getting hit, but the **laser beams** chased them down and laid the finishing blows.

Lafier occasionally directed the crew to maneuver the ship this way or that, her eyes glued to the **planar space map**. There were ten **space-time bubbles** in a row, lying in wait for **Trample-Blitz Squadron 1**. They were most likely patrol ships, one per bubble.

In all probability, they had a head-to-head fight with an enemy patrol ship ahead of them. Needless to say, the enemy were under heavy fire themselves. The **mines** dispatched by the faraway **strike squadron** had overtaken Trample-Blitz Squadron 1, and they were fusing with the enemy ships' **bubbles**. Neither side was using their

mines for defense; they weren't aiming to fend off each other's volleys, instead aiming solely for the extermination of the enemy — no matter the losses.

Lafier knitted her eyebrows, tearing her attention from the **space map** back toward her out-of-ship spatio-sensory perception-scape. Three **mines** were tracing complex lines in their path toward their portside. The mobile turret clusters on that side might not be enough to deal with them.

Lafier ordered the ship to veer in an attempt to buy some time. At the same time, she set the targets' order of priority, and tried to destroy them. Yet one of the mines managed to sneak into close range.

The **lasers** focused on it, and it detonated. The ship rocked.

"Any damage?" asked Lafier.

"Extremely slight damage, Commander. None inside the ship, at least," said the **Clerk, Vanguard Starpilot Linn Ssynec Raucr Dreuc Haider Ghintec**.

"Laser Cannon 304 down," reported *Gnomboch*. "I apologize, **Ship Commander**."

"Don't apologize. It isn't your fault," she said, coming down on him somewhat. For whatever reason, newly appointed **soldiers** feared Lafier an inordinate amount, and she was sad that she'd ended up getting used to such treatment. "Can it be stowed away?"

"Yes, ma'am. I'll stow it right away." The rookie **starpilot** rushed to tuck the cannon back into the ship.

"**Inspector Supervisor**, see that it's repaired," ordered Lafier.

"Roger." She issued her own commands to the **Mechanics NCCs** on standby on the starboard side. "Team Aydriahn, hurry to the Turret Cluster 3 Storage Deck."

"Another three mines incoming," said Ecryua. "...There they go."

Fortunately for them, their point of fusion was elsewhere.

"The **bubble** of the *Pancaubh* is gone!" reported Yatesh. An allied ship, down.

Lafier nodded slightly. She hadn't needed to be told; the area the *Pancaubh* occupied moments prior was now home to a giant mass of **space-time particles**. She had grown quite accustomed to this pressure since her days captaining an assault ship. And while right now, all they had to protect them was the mobile turrets, it all boiled down to the same simple do-or-die equation as always. She and her crew could very well lose their lives in a flash. For that reason, among others, they were obligated to run through every available option.

"I have received a report regarding the damaged cannon," said the **Inspector Supervisor**. "It will take more than three hours to repair it."

"And what do you think, Inspector?"

“I have no doubts as to my subordinates’ competence.”

Lafier was of the same mind. At the very least, she trusted Grinshia. “In that case, you are to order your subordinates to go back on standby.”

“Understood.”

Lafier figured that rather than making them work on repairs that wouldn’t be completed before the battle was over, she had best let them rest. They’d need to work their tails off in the time to come.

Her **wristgear** rang; someone wished to tell her something in confidence. This couldn’t be some trifling concern, either. Those who didn’t really know Lafier were phobic of her as an Abliar, and among those who did know her well, there were none who’d disturb her in the middle of combat.

“**Ship Commander**,” said Grinshia. “May I hazard an opinion?”

“Can you keep it brief?”

“Yes, ma’am. I believe you ought to let them repair it.”

“Why?”

“To keep them distracted, ma’am.”

“I see,” Lafier nodded. *If she says so, it must be true. She used to be an NCC herself, so she must know how they feel all too well.*

Starpilots and **NCCs** fought alongside one another, but one of the ways their experiences differed was their battlefield mentalities.

The **mines’** dance of death began nearing them once again. Lafier turned off the **wristgear** and shifted the stance of the ship before giving the **Inspector Supervisor** her orders: “Change of plans. You should have them repair it after all, but consider it low-priority.”

“Roger,” she replied, somewhat cheerily.

The first stage of the attack was behind them, but soon they would face a daunting showdown — an engagement with an enemy patrol ship.

“An **inter-bubble communication** from **Squadron Command**,” reported Yatesh. ““The *Flicaubh* is to fuse with Enemy **Bubble 102**.””

“Send an *agac féchoth* (roger-that signal),” said Lafier.

The **Commandant** had seemingly chosen their opponent for them. The only question was whether the enemy would bite — and bite they did. It appeared the enemy **bubbles** were not inclined to fuse with each other, opting for one-on-one confrontations.

Lafier looked at her left hand. If only a **control gauntlet** were equipped onto it... “Assume combat acceleration.”

“**EM cannons** readying to fire.”

“Assuming combat acceleration,” said Grinshia. That instant, a low hum filled the bridge. “**Main engines**, full throttle. All clear.”

“**EM cannons**, all clear,” said the **Gunner**. “Safeties released, and first shot loaded. We can punch it at any time.”

“This is your **Ship Commander** speaking,” announced Lafier over the speakers. “The ship will be engaging in a dogfight, reaching G-forces outside of the **gravity control system**’s power to absorb. All hands are to brace themselves.”

The inner surface of the **bubble** exhibited signs of fusion. If they’d witnessed it visually, it’d appear as shining rainbow ripples to the naked eye.

“Aim the bow toward the fusion point,” Lafier ordered Arbohf. “You may fire as you see fit. I shall leave the steering to you.” She reckoned it would behoove the ship to entrust things to the pilot, without any verbal direction from her.

“That’s what I’m talking about, ma’am! Um... I mean, roger that,” he said, going from amped to solemn.

Lafier’s envy spiked, and most of the people on the bridge no doubt shared her sentiment. It was utterly natural for any given Abh to want to pilot a huge warship totally in sync with their own body.

Lafier spied the **space map**. The blue dots representing allied ships and the red dots representing the enemy drew ever closer until, at last, they collided, and turned into purple dots representing individual clashes. The purple dots popped up one after the other, and eventually, it was the *Flicaubh*’s dot’s turn. Its **bubble** and that of the enemy (numbered 102) combined, to be labeled by the map as “Combat Bubble 17.”

“Firing!” Arbohf discharged the **EM cannons** a split-second before bubble fusion. The whole hull screeched.

“**Fusing**,” mentioned Ecryua, almost sleepily.

Even as the two bubbles became one, the enemy launched six **nuclear fusion shells** their way. The mobile turrets capable of sweeping the front of the *Flicaubh* with fire roared to life.

The fusion shells, which were blasted at around a hundredth of the speed of light, were tougher targets than **mines**. Still, one was neutralized by the firing line. Arbohf made the *Flicaubh* skid to the side, as to dodge the remaining shells, which streaked past its portside. The left-side turrets sought to bombard them with a shower of beams; the shells the *Flicaubh* fired in addition missed their marks. The EM cannons’ next shots were loaded somewhere deep within the raid ship and launched without delay. These missed as well.

Lafier felt frustrated, to the point she found herself hoping Arbohf would fall out of his seat for her.

While the same was true of all ship types in wartime, there was little leeway in the makeup of the crew of a raid ship, and the bridge personnel were no exception. Arbohf was the one and only **Gunner**. If he proved unable to execute the mission, the **Ship Commander** would then take his place. Of course, she didn’t actually wish injury upon a

subordinate, not even in jest. If the bridge ever took enough damage for somebody to get hurt badly enough to incapacitate them, they were all dead anyway.

She was expecting extreme fatigue on his part, but Arbohf was having the time of his life maneuvering the ship. Her jealousy only worsened, but a ship commander had a ship commander's work to do. "*Gnomboch*, set the range of all of the turrets to 'no limit.'"

After several exchanges of fire, the *Flicaubh* and the enemy ship passed each other by. A patrol ship was an easier target than a small and nimble **mine**. They could hit it with lasers from a distance they could never hope to hit a mine. Both ships spewed their beams and scored some damage, but naturally, they succeeded only in scratching one another. If **laser cannons** were enough to wreck a giant war vessel, there would be no need for **antiproton** or **EM cannons**.

After they zoomed past each other, the rear EM cannons of both screamed out. One of the enemy's shells exploded close by, catching the *Flicaubh* in a shockwave full of pelting shrapnel.

"Breach in Storehouse 2!" reported Jint. "No injuries to personnel. Pressurization intact."

The two warships jostled for position in a bid to land a fatal strike on the other.

Lafier's eyes were on the **space map** — it seemed the fight in one **bubble** had concluded. Its representative dot turned yellow, signaling it was unclear what happened within.

And that dot was headed toward them.

"No signal identifying them as allies," reported Yatesh. "It would seem the *Tacecaubh* has been destroyed."

The yellow space-time bubble turned red and was newly labeled Enemy Bubble 211. And it was coming for them.

"Hurry!" Lafier told Arbohf. "Fresh troops are coming in on their side. Though if you're of the belief that one ship to contend with isn't sufficiently formidable, we could stay instead."

"Let's not, ma'am," said Arbohf. "My life is on the line, too, after all."

"And my life is expendable?" asked Ecryua.

"I had my hands full worrying about my own life," he replied.

"**Vice Captain**," said Lafier. "Steer towards ten o'clock."

"Roger." Ecryua focused on guiding the bubble.

However, the bubble now contained more than just the *Flicaubh*. Enemy ships were also loaded with **space-time bubble generator engines**.

What was an extra foe to the *Flicaubh* was reinforcements to the enemy; naturally, they tried to draw closer. The two bubble generators dueled, but Ecryua was the better steerer, if only by a hair. Their

bubble was staggering, but it moved toward ten o'clock all the same. Yet the bubble pursuing them was faster.

The *Flicaubh* secured a position to fire from and showered the enemy in **fusion shells** from the flank, but their target dodged. Now the enemy had the firing lines of its mobile turrets concentrated on the bow.

"**EM Cannon** 1 down!" exclaimed Arbohf.

Even **lasers** could dole out that level of damage.

"Can it be repaired?" Lafier asked Grinshia.

"No, it can't," replied the **Inspector Supervisor** immediately.

"I surmised as much." Lafier glanced at the **Gunner**.

"Oh well. I'll manage, somehow," said Arbohf.

"Okay," Lafier nodded.

The enemy ship's attitude control system groaned as it attempted to point its bow toward them. The *Flicaubh*'s **main engine** was in full throttle, the crew trying to close the distance before the enemy was aligned — and the *Flicaubh* won that race. It appeared they'd be able to fly past the enemy before they would get taken hold of by their bow.

"Aim for their turrets and jet thrusters. Can you do that?" asked Lafier.

"Yes, I'll do my best," answered *Gnomboch*.

Lafier figured she'd give him this one opportunity. If he proved incapable, she planned to wrest back control of the mobile turrets. This was war, and this battle zone was extremely exacting. Granted, this was the ideal place to toughen up a **starpilot**, but she had no intention of giving him that trial by fire at the expense of her crew's lives. Besides, she had a feeling she had plenty of room for improvement herself.

The two ships passed each other while trading fierce volleys of **lasers**. *Gnomboch* adjusted the turrets' field of fire, aiming for the jet thrusters on the enemy's side. Two of them were blown away, much to his credit. But they couldn't make out the extent of the damage from here. Were the thrusters totally down for the count, or did they just give them a dent?

"Nice job!" said Arbohf.

The ship distanced itself and fired its stern-side **EM cannon**. The shot missed.

"How long until **space-time fusion**?" asked Lafier.

"13:30 by ship's time, give or take eight minutes," replied Ecryua at once.

"Make it 13:40," she commanded.

"Can't be done," stated Ecryua, quite to the point.

"Did you hear that, **Vanguard** Arbohf?" Lafier asked the **Gunner**.

“Yes, loud and clear,” said Arbohf. “How I curse these ears of mine.”

It looked as though the Gunner still had room to breathe.

“Then hurry it up.”

“Roger,” said Arbohf, even as he struggled to reach a new position.

The two ships were trying to face each other’s flanks. The enemy certainly seemed comparatively sluggish. Lafier decided to let *Gnomboch* control the mobile turrets for the remainder of the battle.

The main engine system roared, and the distance between them and the enemy closed rapidly once again. After firing the **EM cannon**, Arbohf clicked his tongue loudly enough for the Ship Commander to hear, and he blasted **propulsor flames** from the portside jets.

Nuclear fusion shells glanced past the *Flicaubh*’s left side. The shells must have judged they could still deal considerable damage at this distance, so they simultaneously detonated, rocking the ship.

Gnomboch read off the list of damaged **laser cannons**. “201, 202, 205...”

“There’s no need to report that,” Lafier cut in. “Just focus on the enemy’s thrusters.”

“I apologize, ma’am.”

Lafier cast a cold stare at the temporary **Gunner**.

Gnomboch straightened up. “I mean, *roger*.”

“The damage is widespread,” said Grinshia. “The **Mechanics Branch** is looking overloaded. Please tell us the highest priority.”

“The ship’s maneuverability,” said Lafier instantly. “I refuse to let my ship fall.”

“Understood.” The **Inspector Supervisor** clung to the console and issued a series of complex instructions to her crew. If she had been Samson, they would no doubt have been treated to an earful about **Star Forces**’ regulations regarding overwork compensation.

All the while, the two ships were approaching each other again. Attitude control could not be completed in time, so they passed each other by, though not without a heated laser exchange.

Lafier’s eyes were on the **planar space map** as she listened to the damage report. Enemy **Bubble 211** was too close for comfort. If they were inclined to engage in a one-on-one clash, then this would be their last chance.

But there was hope—

“The *Marscaubh* is approaching,” said Ecryua.

The *Marscaubh*, which had destroyed an enemy, was coming to their rescue. It was humiliating, but there was no helping it.

“Let’s take the ship closer to the *Marscaubh*,” ordered Lafier.

Alas, the enemy was faster. Lafier didn’t need to point that out to

Arbohf, who understood full well.

“**Ship Commander**,” said Arbohf, his voice tinged with a measure of impatience. “I’m going to settle things.”

“Right. I expect only the best.”

Fortunately, it seemed the novice **Starpilot**’s efforts were somewhat rewarded, as the enemy ship’s maneuverability was considerably reduced.

The *Flicaubh* fired its bow’s **EM cannon**. The trajectory of the three **nuclear fusion shells** zoomed straight for the enemy ship. These shells also housed engines, but since the output was lower than the initial speed, keeping their course only slightly bent was the best they could do. Yet that was enough. One of them bored into the ship’s hold.

“Bull’s-eye!” shouted Arbohf.

Moments later, the enemy ship was converted into energy by its own antimatter fuel.

“Conduct **space-time splitting** at once,” ordered Lafier.

The more mass inside a **space-time bubble**, the slower it was. To move nimbly required shedding excess mass. The **bubble** containing the *Flicaubh* expelled the mass that was once the enemy ship, causing waves of **space-time particles** to ripple outward.

“Steer us towards the *Marscaubh*, **Vice Captain. Communications Officer**, send out an identification signal. The **Inspector Supervisor** and the **Clerk** are to apprise me of the damages.”

At the bridge, which was beginning to buzz with activity, only Arbohf, who had finished his task, wore a blank expression.

“If you’re tired, I can do it for you,” said Lafier, out of pure goodwill.

“No, **Ship Commander**, I couldn’t let you do that.”

“I see,” said Lafier, crestfallen. She looked into the screen of the captain’s control console, which displayed the damages as summarized by Grinshia and Jint. Luckily, the maneuverability hadn’t diminished, but their combat potential had taken a sizable hit. They might be able to be accompanied by the *Marscaubh*, but that depended on that ship’s current status.

“Send the **flagship** an **inter-bubble communication**,” Lafier ordered Yatesh. They would be relaying the damage report to the **squadron flagship**, the *Chetucaubh*.

“The *Chetucaubh* has replied,” reported the **Communications Officer**. “The *Flicaubh* and the *Marscaubh* are to strike Enemy **Space-Time Bubble 211**. Over.”

“So they aren’t about to let us take a rest,” Lafier smiled. And they would have to wait until later to mourn the dead, too. But that was fine. She may not have been steering the ship herself, but her blood

was still seething. “**Communications Officer**, send an **inter-bubble communication** to the *Marscaubh*.” Then she picked up the transceiver and made another announcement to the whole crew. “This is your **Ship Commander** speaking. The ship will be engaging in combat again shortly.”

The war between the **Humankind Empire of Abh** and the Three Nations Alliance had entered its seventh year. At present, the Empire had the upper hand. The **Imperial Star Forces** had begun with Operation Phantom Flame, which was three years in the making, and successfully cut off about a fourth of the United Humankind’s star systems from it. That mission was followed by Operation Hunter, which aimed to mop up those areas and take them over. Upon that mission’s completion, the **Empire** recovered all of the territory that had been seized from them at the beginning of the war and secured new territory besides.

Planar space had been tranquil for some time afterward. The **Empire** assumed control over the **planar space** adjacent to the territories it acquired (or re-acquired), but that was not to say it had their respective **landworlds** in an iron grip. It was the Abh way to simply wait patiently until they subjected themselves to the Empire — so long as Landers didn’t venture into planar space. That being said, if a given landworld was actively hostile, the Empire was forced to commit some forces to surveil it. While the Abh amassed their troops and firepower in anticipation of the next big operation, they observed turbulent landworlds and applied coercive pressure. In addition, after the long-term operations, the **soldiers** needed a break.

Traditionally, the Abh saw the battlefield as the ultimate setting for love to bloom. On the other hand, the overwhelming majority believed it was not a suitable place to *foster* that love. That was one reason many **soldiers** left their **warships** in favor of their home of *Lacmhacarh*, or small trading ships.

To the Abh, war was everyday. And while their lifespans were long compared to Landers’, they were still mortal. The Abh didn’t view their own lifespans as long. Quite the opposite — in the face of the stars, they considered themselves extremely short-lived. As such, war was no excuse to neglect the important things in life.

Naturally, the **Empire** was wary of a Three Nations Alliance attack. The enemy had stuck to a defensive strategy throughout both operations, so logically, their main forces were still intact. Yet the Three Nations Alliance was clearly slow to act. There was no sign they were launching an offensive.

In the meantime, newly constructed ships and newly trained recruits were joining the ranks. Moreover, the ships that had overseen the surrender of **landworlds** and the **soldiers** that had failed in

romance returned to the zone of war. The Empire was prepared.

The Empire held the fact that the enemy hadn't shown any aggression in high suspicion, but they couldn't exactly wait for the Alliance to make the first move, either. The Abh were tetchy when it came to the state of affairs in **3-space**.

A new operation was hatched. They would take over space from the new territory acquired between the **Raseess** and **Syoorgzedeh Monarchies**, to the **Milky Way Portals Central Disc Sector**. At the same time, they would reach the **Central Disc** cutting across the border between the UH and the People's Sovereign Stellar Union (from the Barkeh Monarchy starting point). This would leave the UH isolated and alone. Some suspected the enemy had some way to escape to their allied nations without passing through **planar space**, but that was next to impossible.

The mission was named *Borperh* (Twin Thorns).

As was customary, the one in charge was the Crown Prince-cum-**Imperial Fleet Commander-in-Chief, Imperial Admiral Abliarsec Néic Lamsarr Larth Barcoer Dusanh**. Nevertheless, the Crown Prince was scheduled to stay in *Lacmhacarh* along with some reserve forces, as he needed to keep up multiple distant battle fronts at the same time. The two who were de facto heading the fleet were the **Vice Commanders-in-Chief**. *Roïglaharérh Byrer Borperr* (Twin Thorns Fleet Vice Commander-in-Chief), **Star Forces Admiral Cotponic** commanded the New Territories Fleet, while the other Star Forces Admiral, *Lecaimh*, commanded the Barkeh Monarchy Fleet.

The *Flicaubh*, commanded by **Vice Hecto-Commander** Abliar, belonged to Trample-Blitz Squadron 1, which in turn belonged to the *Byrec Matlogona Borperr Iädbyrer Acharr* (Twin Thorns Fleet 24 Assault Sub-Fleet) named the *Bosurec*.

It was right after they and the *Marscaubh* had buried the enemy ship.

“Ship Commander, it's the signal to retreat,” reported Yatesh.

The retreat signal was issued from the flagship of the Twin Thorns Fleet 24, the *Elcaü*. All ships that received it beamed it out as well, and so the signal to retreat resonated throughout the fleet and caused a stir within **planar space**.

“Relay it,” ordered Lafier, but the *Flicaubh* was likely one of the last ships to receive the signal. “Conduct **space-time splitting**, and fast.”

The *Flicaubh* was now alone in its **bubble** once more.

“What are our orders from the **squadron flagship**?” Lafier asked the **Communications Officer**.

“None yet, ma'am — ah, here they come.” Yatesh deciphered the

code:

“FROM: **TRAMPLE-BLITZ SQUADRON 1** COMMAND
TO: ALL SHIPS UNDER COMMAND
RETREAT FOR SQUADRON BASE.’ That’s all.”

Was the message so short because they had that much trust placed in them?

“**Space-time bubble in stationary-state**,” ordered Lafier, but Ecryua didn’t carry out those orders right away. Instead she gave Lafier a dubious look. “We’re going to let the flow of **space-time particles** take us, and survey the situation,” explained Lafier.

“Roger,” her Vice Captain nodded. “**Space-time bubble in stationary-state**.”

Lafier peered at the **planar space map**.

The front lines were still in disarray. There were still **space-time bubbles** locked in battle here and there, as well as enemy ships in hot pursuit of fleeing allied ships. But the confusion settled down after a while.

“We have intercepted what appears to be the enemy’s signal to retreat,” announced Yatesh, during the tail end of the turmoil.

Enemy units left the action zone one after the other. Needless to say, no allied ships gave chase.

Lafier waited until she deemed the enemy far enough away to issue her next command: “**Space-time bubble in total mobile-state**. Course: 180 degrees. Ride the space-time particle flow and retreat for the Socrates Star System. Relax all battle arrangements. **Inspector...**”

Grinshia raised her head.

“...Are we in need of any urgent repairs?” asked Lafier.

“No, **Ship Commander**,” she responded. “We’re in terrible shape, but the ship will hold out until anchorage.”

“Then you had best let the **NCCs** rest.”

“They will be overjoyed,” said Grinshia, standing up. “But I would like to create a list of points to repair. Please permit me to exit the **bridge**, ma’am.”

“By all means.” Lafier then looked Jint’s way.

Jint didn’t need to hear the question before answering. “No injuries, and no environmental abnormalities, **Ship Commander**.”

“Good,” she said with sincere relief, before she leaned her body against the back of the captain’s seat. She now understood just how exhausted she was.

The Abh often called Abliars lovers of war, and she wasn’t denying that. Yet she could hardly remain calm while her life and the lives of her subordinates were hanging so precariously. Were it not for this sense of tension, battle would be boring. A portion of Landers mistook this as bloodthirst on the part of the Abh, but that was an

absurd misunderstanding. The Abh simply liked the idea of surviving to see another day, and nothing more.

“How many times will we have to repeat this same fight?” Arbohf muttered.

“It would be easier on us if they could just surrender,” said *Gnomboch* shyly.

“If they were going to surrender that easily, they would have never picked the fight to begin with.”

“Everyone makes mistakes.”

Arbohf looked amused by this. “How can you be so sure we’re not the ones making that mistake?”

“Huh...” *Gnomboch* pulled a puzzled expression.

“If they up and surrendered on us, wouldn’t you be left unsatisfied with how little you got to fight?”

“No. I know there will be many more opportunities in the future.”

“You talking about this star system? I thought we were talking bigger.”

“What about you, **Vanguard Starpilot**? Would you be left unsatisfied?”

“No, not me. I’ve had my fill.”

“Is that so?” Lafier butted in. “I hadn’t noticed. I suggest you submit a transfer request sooner rather than later. Would you care to be an instructor at an **academy**, perhaps?”

“Please don’t mind me, **Ship Commander**. Forget I said anything. I’m going to spend the rest of my days as a **gunner**.”

Lafier was joking, of course. Arbohf was a skilled **gunner**, and he would have been difficult to replace. Also, as **Ship Commander** she had read their personnel records, so she was already aware of Arbohf’s wishes, which, in a way, were very Abh-like.

“That doesn’t seem feasible,” said *Gnomboch*. “You’ll get promoted, too, **Vanguard**. You’ll be an **assault ship captain**, or thereabouts, won’t you?”

Arbohf just grinned in response.

“Just so you know, **Linewing**,” said Yatesh, “This guy has turned down a promotion to **Deca-Commander** twice now.”

Visibly astounded, *Gnomboch* looked at the Gunner. “But why, sir?”

“I told you. I’m fine being a gunner. Or more accurately, I’m happy as long as I get to pilot. If I get promoted, any and all opportunity to do so will slip from my grasp. And I’d hate to be stuck piloting some **supply ship** or **battle-line ship**.”

“But an **assault ship captain** can pilot, too,” *Gnomboch* pointed out. “And aren’t assault ship pilots even freer?”

“I don’t think so,” said Arbohf. “Captaining a ship is a heavy

burden. I want as little responsibility on my shoulders as possible.”

“I think **gunners** have quite a bit of responsibility, too,” said Lafier.

“You’re right, **Ship Commander**. But a **gunner’s** responsibility is nothing compared to a **ship commander’s**. I put up with what responsibility I need to in order to have my fun, but that has its limits.”

“And the rank of **Gunner** is your responsibility limit?”

“Yes, ma’am,” he nodded vigorously. “Figuring out where you’re most comfortable and making that the ceiling of your career is a privilege that **Imperials** don’t enjoy. Aren’t you jealous, ma’am?”

Lafier nearly found herself affirming that automatically.

It was a duty of an **Imperial** to earn promotion. Lafier’s father, Dubeus the **King of Clybh**, told her he gave up on vying for the emperorship very early on, but even so, he had risen to the rank of **Commodore**. And now that war had broken out, he had been promoted to **Grand Commodore**, and was commanding a fleet. While he wasn’t going to be **Imperial Fleet Commander-in-Chief**, all **Imperials** were obligated to obtain a **rank** of sufficient importance to be able to play a role during a time of crisis.

And this was wartime. There really was no choice — Lafier was forced to aim for the highest throne. She had taken that as a fact of life since she was born, and to this day she harbored no misgivings as to that way of life. Yet it was also true that at times, she thought it disagreeable.

“What about you, *Gnomboch*?” Lafier asked the young **Linewing**.

“My dream is to make it to **Commodore** rank, ma’am,” he answered unhesitatingly.

“It’s been a while since I’ve heard a dream that straightforward,” Yatesh teased.

“You’re just tainted by cynicism,” said Arbohf. “What about you?”

“Who, me?” Yatesh dithered. “Hmm, well... Oh, right. I’d be happy if I could get myself a small little star somewhere.”

“Heh. So your dream is to be a **baron**, huh?”

“And a dream it will remain.”

Happily for its crew, the atmosphere aboard the *Flicaubh* was convivial. It was Lafier’s responsibility to make sure they returned from the next battle alive, too.

The *Saudec Cemarar* (Kemar Portal) was the stronghold.

The PSSU had ultra-long-range **mobile space-time mines**. As the name suggested, they were **mines** with giant range, comparable to the cruising capacity of a small vessel. But since they were unmanned, they lacked flexibility, and they were even slower than normal mines when in 3-space, so they were overall difficult to use effectively.

The Abh considered the PSSU to be an especially tiresome opponent from among the Lander nations, but they did appreciate the PSSU's sole point of eccentricity — their emphasis on employing these hard-to-use mines. It was these rare weapons that were defending the **Kemar Portal**, and to great and menacing effect.

There seemed to be a factory manufacturing ultra-long-range mines in the Kemar System, and it appeared the materials needed for them could also be procured within the system itself. In other words, they never had to worry about running out of ammunition.

The **Star Forces** intended to counteract this with a concentration of **escort squadrons**. But **defense ships** were weak to assault ships and patrol ships. When the **space-time bubbles** of **mines** combined with the bubbles of enemy ships, it always spelled trouble.

Before getting to engage in a battle the likes of which history had never seen, they needed to shave away as much of the enemy's forces as possible. Of course, the enemy was of the same mind. To the PSSU, this counterattack was likely a preliminary test of sorts. Upon reflection, this was the first time they were fighting in earnest. Up until now, there was a distinct impression the PSSU was simply tagging along after the UH like a gaggle of children afraid they'd be ostracized otherwise.

Even after the launch of Operation Twin Thorns had started besetting the star system, the enemy's fighting spirit seemed low. Perhaps they aimed to drag the **Star Forces** deeper into their territory. Yet the rear guard unit, the *Byrec Matloghuta Borperr* (Twin Thorns Fleet 25), was doing its best to maintain contact with the imperial mainland, rendering that strategy worthless. The more time passed, the more one thorn grew in size, isolating the PSSU from its allies.

At last, the battle front reached the **Kemar Portal**, and the PSSU finally hunkered down. The majority of **soldiers** on the front lines took this fact as quite favorable indeed. But by the same token, this meant they had some furious clashes on their hands.

Lafier cast a sidelong glance at Ecryua. *What are her dreams like?* But that's not what she said: "I'm going to rest. Give the crew breaks in sequential order."

"Roger," Ecryua replied.

Chapter 2: The Battle-Line Ship

Caïsaumh

The second of the **Twin Thorns** was also developing smoothly. The mass of ships, with *Byrec Locutena Borperr* (Twin Thorns Fleet 11) as the forerunner, was approaching the **Central Disc**. The main opponent in this zone was the UH.

If and when this operation was seen to completion, the territory of the UH would be reduced by more than half, and it would be completely cut off from the Greater Alkont Republic. Overall, the principal objective of Operation Twin Thorns was to divide the powers that made up the Three Nations Alliance.

The **flagship** of the core unit, *Byrec Lobina Borperr* (Twin Thorns Fleet 13), was a **patrol ship** named the *Chaicaü*. It was in anchorage near the star of Ercohn. About two *saidagh* farther out in orbit from the *Chaicaü* revolved the strike sub-fleet *Gudersec*, where the battle-line ship *Caïsaumh* was located.

Battle-line ships carried a number of **mobile space-time mines** aboard and fired them in combat. That was essentially their sole function. They were **mine** depot ships, so to speak. Though equipped with a large assortment of defensive firearms, they were, at their core, no different from **supply ships**.

The **mines** of the **Empire** were small compared to the PSSU's, but they were still enormous. Even after nearly a millennium of steady improvement, **space-time bubble generators** were machines that took up space, and they required striking amounts of **antimatter fuel**. Consequently, battleships with a multitude of **mines** were huge. They were three times as massive as patrol ships, in fact.

They weren't just massive, though. They also harbored sizable crews. The lion's share of people aboard imperial ships were **NCCs** whose work centered around maintenance. In the case of a battle-line ship, there were NCCs who looked after the ship itself, as well as *Sach Satytr* (Mine NCCs) who managed the **mines**.

Given that, their living quarters could be likened to villages in size, if not towns. Battle-line ships were so big that they, along with supply ships, accepted children onboard. In a way, that was preserving an ancient tradition of the **Star Forces'** history. In the past, the Abh had raised children aboard battleships, regardless of their size or whether it was peacetime or wartime. This felt quite natural to the

Abh, who regarded **interstellar ships** as their dwellings. However, after realizing that their penchant for fighting with children aboard soured their reputation among their enemies, the Abh stopped the practice. They were afraid to be misunderstood as waging war partly for sport (or, less charitably interpreted, to be *found out* as such). In any case, the Abh believed that fighting in good faith was courtesy to those they slew.

Even though laborers were allowed to bring children with them aboard ship, this came with various adverse effects, and **starpilots** who were raising children were no longer assigned to smaller-scale ships.

On large vessels such as battle-line ships, people were still allowed to work while raising children, even after so many years. This was only true during peacetime, of course. During times of war, no one apart from **soldiers** was allowed aboard, save for special cases.

There was also a space set aside for day care centers in the residential area of the *Caïsaumh*. However, since this warship was built after the war started, no children had ever played in that space as of yet. With the ship at the outfitting stage, a different facility was erected in that section — a mess hall for **starpilots**. From the **bridge**, it was easier to come here, the planned site of the day care, than go all the way to the actual mess hall. If the *Caïsaumh* were to survive this war, then construction work would be conducted to change it back into a proper day care.

The *Röidrociac* (Deputy Communications Officer) disliked this place.

“Deputy Communications Officer.”

“Yes, **Ship Commander**,” replied **Linewing Starpilot Abliarsec Néic Dubreuscr Boerh Üémdaiser Duhirh**, Viscount of Wemdyse. Sitting at the end of a giant table, he put down his bowl and stretched his back, looking in the direction of the voice that called for him. The assembled starpilots of the *Caïsaumh* were eating at the table.

The source of the voice was a man whose dark blue hair had a green body to it. He was sitting at the head, and he was the **Ship Commander, Hecto-Commander Bersautec**.

But Duhier’s gaze jumped over him and focused on the wall behind him. The room was being used as a mess hall for the starpilots, but the walls still fit the specifications for a daycare. Since the place was set up with Abh children in mind, said children were expected to bounce around in a microgravity environment. As such, the walls were elastic, made to soften collisions. And the art on the walls depicted winged cats, smiling stars, and various other images that would please infant sensibilities.

Duhier recalled enjoying the sensation of sinking slightly into the

wall whenever he slammed into it as a small child, like most Abhs when they were very young.

“You look bored,” said Behrsoht.

Duhier was snapped out of his nostalgic reverie. The reason he disliked the **starpilot** mess hall was because of the *Caïsaumh*’s custom of eating meals all together. To be more precise, he couldn’t get on with the man who invented the custom and forced it upon them — Behrsoht.

“I’m not bored, sir,” said Duhier. “If I *look* bored, then that’s because...” *others look bored when you yourself are*. But he couldn’t say that. He instead searched for a suitable explanation.

“Is it bias on my part?” cut in Behrsoht.

Duhier cocked his head. “Bias? What do you mean, sir?”

“I just thought maybe an **Imperial** might be dissatisfied being stuck on a ship that works from the rear like a battle-line ship.”

“Any ship makes for a fine place to die for an Abliar,” Duhier declared. At the same time, he had to wonder whether the **Ship Commander** didn’t much care for Duhier’s assignment. If that was the case, then he was truly a man to look down on.

“Commendable words,” nodded Behrsoht. But he was looking not at Duhier, but rather at the plate rising from within the table.

“Thank you very much, sir.” Duhier picked up the bowl. Sadly, the *synmhec rurur* (crane mince) *rubeth* (clear soup) had gotten cold.

“It wasn’t a compliment,” said Behrsoht, as he tucked into the next dish.

“No, sir?” Duhier pushed the bowl aside and pulled a new plate toward him — *potappyrh sogzerer* (citrus sauce pork roast). He was happier the man *wasn’t* praising him. Hearing this **Ship Commander**’s praises did nothing for him anyway.

By that time, Behrsoht had totally eaten up his meat. “I have no intention of making this anyone’s final resting place.”

“You came to the battlefield without steeling yourself for death first?” The **Linewing** stopped his chopsticks. But he feared his tone had been too aggressive.

“Did you come to the battlefield looking for a place to die?” But Behrsoht didn’t seem angry on the surface. He was looking at the table in anticipation of the coming of the next dish. “You don’t seem that down on your luck to me.”

“I don’t *wish* to die, but it’s a possibility, isn’t it? I’m just saying that if this place were carved into my marker at the **Hall of Remembrance**, I wouldn’t be the least bit embarrassed. I don’t think this ship is anything to be ashamed of.”

“I’m not ashamed of it, either. I wouldn’t be embarrassed to die here. But that doesn’t make it a *good* place to die.”

“I think the captain’s seat is the best place to die,” said Duhier.

“Listen here. You may be **Emperor** one day, and I don’t begrudge you that. If you do become Emperor, I just ask you remember me once in a while. But even if that day comes, don’t force your values on others. Right now, you’re just a **deputy communications officer**, the lowest position on the **bridge**. If my cat were here, you’d be the one feeding it.”

Duhier was secretly grateful he was sitting far from the Ship Commander. Experience was telling him that if he was within Behrsoht’s reach, he’d be giving him a rub on the head. While he knew that was probably just how Behrsoht showed affection, Duhier couldn’t stand it.

“I apologize,” said Duhier, wanting this to be over.

“A **prince** shouldn’t apologize so easily.”

“What sort of behavior do you want out of me, **Ship Commander**?” he pushed back. “Should I behave as a **deputy communications officer**, or as a member of the **Imperial Household**?”

“That depends on my mood.”

Duhier was nonplussed.

“I won’t tell you to feel out my mood, though.”

“That would be a huge help,” said Duhier, though he didn’t let his guard down.

“Sense my mood instead.”

“What’s the difference between sensing it and feeling it out?”

“They couldn’t be more different.” Behrsoht ill-manneredly shook his chopsticks in the air. “Are we going to be all right if somebody who could take the **Throne** doesn’t know that much?”

“...May I ask you to explain it to me?” he said slowly.

“If I ask you to ‘feel it out,’ I’m asking you to think about it. To sense it, you don’t need to think.” Behrsoht finally put down his chopsticks. “It’ll simply come from the recesses of your brain.”

“That seems rather more difficult, sir.”

“It doesn’t matter if it’s difficult. Do it anyway. You don’t need to do anything so complicated as *thinking* just yet. On the **bridge** of this ship, you’re the lowliest position there is. A ‘**starpilot**’ in name only. You’re a glorified chore boy. So just *sense* it.”

“I get the impression you’re being terribly unreasonable,” said Duhier bluntly.

“Don’t get cheeky, *Fiac Lartsor*.”

Duhier was at a loss for words. Behrsoht had just called him a prince, so he wasn’t allowed to apologize. Of course, he didn’t honestly think he should apologize, but he was beginning to give up on the idea of confronting this man directly. If he could escape from

the conversation with an apology he didn't mean, he'd do it in a heartbeat.

"**Ship Commander**, please don't pick on my subordinate so much," said a woman sitting three seats away from Duhier. She was Duhier's direct superior, the **Senior Communications Officer**, **Vanguard Starpilot Bhonh**.

Duhier didn't dislike her, but he wasn't terribly fond of her, either. He felt she was treating him like a special guest. And this very moment was no different. While she had called him "my subordinate," her tone was somewhat jokey. Duhier got the feeling she didn't think of him as her subordinate, or as a comrade-in-arms.

"I have two corrections for you," said Behrsoht.

"Yes, sir?" *Bhonh's* tawny brown eyes fell on the Ship Commander.

"First of all, I'm talking to *my* subordinate. I'm not talking to *your* subordinate. Don't be so egocentric."

"That's true, but—" began the Senior Communications Officer with the royal blue hair.

But Behrsoht interrupted her. "Second of all, I am not 'picking on' him."

"We have a difference of opinion," said *Bhonh*. "If you're not picking on him, sir, then what *are* you doing? I can't imagine you're *teaching* him anything."

"I'm just following clan tradition."

Duhier was taken aback. "Are you a Sporr, **Ship Commander**?"

There was no way. Even collateral descendants of the Sporr line often called themselves by that name. They weren't like the **Imperials** — they didn't forbid the Sporr **surname** to people outside the direct line, like Imperials did with the Abliar surname.

"I am, in a way," said Behrsoht, vaguely.

Duhier demanded an explanation with his eyes.

"My family tree split off before the founding of the **Empire**, so I can't strictly say I'm part of the clan," said Behrsoht defensively.

"You're not a Sporr in any way, shape, or form," said *Bhonh* sharply.

Duhier speculated his ancestors had been in the engine division of the city-ship Abliar. The Sporr were descendants of the person who had been head of the engine division during the era of the **Empire's** founding. At the time, a different clan had been in charge of each of the divisions within the gargantuan ship that the entirety of Abhkind lived aboard. If the Behrsoht family line derived from a worker in the engine division, then Behrsoht **family traditions** may play up their connection to the Sporr clan. And in an Abh sort of way, that constituted a blood relation. Of course, given their family lines split more than a millennium ago, this was something of a stretch even by

Abh standards.

“But they say that the ranks of the engine division people were decided based on how skillfully they teased the navigation division guys.”

“My clan has never heard tell of any such notion,” said Duhier.

“They just never noticed,” Behrsoht asserted.

“Even so, the circumstances are different now,” said *Bhonh*.

“How could I possibly neglect my clan’s traditions at the hands of *current circumstances* or whatever?”

“Forgive me, sir, but someone in a **ship commander**’s position doesn’t get an opportunity to exhibit their clan’s traditions very often,” chided *Bhonh*.

“So what? It’s not my clan’s style to let their traditions fade away just because there aren’t any *opportunities*.”

“If that really is a tradition in your clan, **Ship Commander**, then that’s splendid,” she said, her tone dripping with suspicion.

For a while after, Behrsoht and *Bhonh* engaged in a verbal dust-up; they were clearly enjoying themselves. Duhier didn’t really get it, but maybe it aided their digestion, or effected some other such mysterious boon only those two could appreciate. Meanwhile, the other **starpilots** were either holding pleasant conversations of their own, or silently tucking in. Perhaps they were used to the Ship Commander and **Senior Communications Officer**’s bickering. Duhier had nobody to talk to, so he was among the latter.

“What’re you drinking, **Linewing**?” Behrsoht accosted him.

“My drink, sir?” Duhier felt ambushed. His gaze fell to the cup in his hand. “It’s hot **peach juice**.”

“You sure like strange stuff.”

“Is that so?” he replied casually. “My sister loves it, actually.”

“Your sister being *Fiac Lamhirr*?” said Behrsoht, startled.

“I don’t have any other siblings.”

“Ah. By the way, would making fun of *Fiac Lamhirr*’s tastes in beverages get under her skin?”

“I’m fairly certain she wouldn’t like her tastes in anything getting mocked, sir.”

“I see. Well, guess I’ll try some, then.”

Duhier didn’t know what to say, or how to react. He couldn’t say “feel free” without seeming like he was picking a fight, but it would be weird to say, “please don’t.” Thankfully, Duhier didn’t need to react, as Behrsoht’s interest shifted to another topic.

At last, the meal was over, and the tea arrived.

“We have to enjoy eating all together like this while we still can,” said Behrsoht, who had recently taken to ending every meal with those words. “What are your plans today, **Vice Captain**?”

“Today is the day I retrieve the cargo,” replied **Deca-Commander Crobosec**, the ship’s **Vice Commander**.

“Ahh, okay,” said Behrsoht, arms folded.

In a prior battle, the *Caisaumh* had used up around half of its **mines**. They had to be replenished before the next engagement, and the day to do so had come around.

“Um...” Duhier stood up resolutely; Behrsoht looked at him quizzically. “May I be allowed to pilot?”

Unlike **assault ships** or patrol ships, where the steerer’s skill was directly related to the battle, it was thought that any **Flight Branch starpilot** could pilot a battle-line ship. Steering wasn’t left to the **Ship Commander** or to the **Senior Gunner**, but to a low-ranked position named **Deputy Navigator**. Furthermore, today’s flight would not be a battle flight.

At such times, it was common enough for people to push the pilot’s seat on newly assigned **linewing starpilots**, even aboard assault ships and other similar ship types. That being said, it was only seen as “pushing” it on them from the perspective of veteran **starpilots**. Piloting battle-line ships and **supply ships** was far from exhilarating, but it did make for good experience for a fresh new starpilot, and Duhier was happy to seize this chance.

“I like that expression, **Linewing**. Almost makes me want to hand down the order,” said Behrsoht.

“So...”

“But that’ll be a no.”

“Could you kindly tell me why?” urged Duhier. While it was strictly forbidden for an **Imperial** to brandish their authority as such, a request this innocuous ought to have been granted to a novice **starpilot** without fuss.

“I see no need to do so,” said Behrsoht flatly.

“Understood.” Duhier saluted. Requesting anything more would be crossing the line. “Please excuse me.”

“Oh, you didn’t do anything that needs excusing,” he grinned. “Any ambitious **linewing** would make the same request.”

Duhier’s dislike of the man only deepened.

It was difficult to resupply **mines**, which were a battle-line ship’s principal weapon. As for why, it was, of course, because they were huge. There was a time when that wasn’t such a liability, since once a battle-line ship had fired off all of the **mines** that had lined its belly, it could just return to the **capital** for resupplying. But now that the battlefield had spread so wide, that was no longer an option. Nowadays, if battle-line ships returned to the **capital** after every battle, it would hobble the war effort. Plus, forcing **supply ships** to

make constant round trips was also inefficient. The **mines** loaded onto a single **supply ship** were capped at a single battle's worth, so making them do the trip was only marginally better than making battle-line ships do it.

As a result, the **Empire** adopted a new method — bringing **mine** plants near to the war front. A **mine** plant had been constructed in the Ercohn system as well. Transport ships loaded with materials processed by nearby star systems and parts that couldn't be self-made (such as **space-time bubble generators**) were always by their side, and battle-line ships awaiting resupply were drifting hungrily around the vicinity.

The *Caïsaumh* pushed through the line of ships. The vessel's **compucrystals** information-linked with those of the factory, thereby forming a single **compucrystal net**.

As a small token of rebellion, Duhier had his **circlet** connected to the ship's exterior spatiosensors.

"This is Elcohn Arms Factory 102." A **starpilot** with the **mine** factory had appeared on the screen. "**Battle-line ship** *Caïsaumh*, please switch to remote control mode."

"Roger," said Behrsoht. "Do it."

This was Duhier's duty: switching control of the ship to remote access.

"See, *Fiac Lartsor*? This is what 'piloting' entails. They won't let you do any subtle movements. Boring, isn't it?"

"Yes," said Duhier, but he didn't mean it. At present, Duhier's *frocragh* could clearly make out the mooring position directed by the factory. The image of the ship lined up with his spatiosensory perception. His **control gauntlet**-equipped left hand moved unconsciously — not that it was currently functional, of course. It was practically decorative.

The *Caïsaumh* propelled itself a short distance, as though in response to Duhier's hand, and entered inertial navigation.

"**Battle-line ship** *Caïsaumh*, please prepare for **mines** to be loaded."

"All right, we're running on schedule." Behrsoht stood up. "**Senior Gunner**, bare all thrusters."

"Roger," replied **Deca-Commander** *Cazzubh*.

"And **Deputy Communications Officer**, get that hand out of the **gauntlet**."

"Yes, sir," said Duhier, blushing. *Did he really have to say that in front of everybody?*

"You're not going to ask why?" said Behrsoht.

"No, sir."

"Well, I'll tell you anyway. It's because that's just being snide."

“I understand, sir.” Duhier couldn’t decide whether to ask his pardon, until eventually, he added an “I apologize.”

“Don’t do it again.”

Meanwhile, the *Caïsaumh* slowly closed the distance with the **mine** factory. Several supply ships were attached to an enormous tube — that was how Elcohn Arms Factory 102 appeared. Yet that tube wasn’t where the *Caïsaumh* was headed. Near the factory, groups of **mines** by the ship’s worth were floating, bound within brutal-looking structures. They were Elcohn Arms Factory 102’s storage spaces.

In the *Caïsaumh*’s case, it was not necessary to carry on a whole ship’s worth, as nearly half of the vessel’s current load remained. They had bundled together the necessary number in advance. The *Caïsaumh* proceeded to anchor by the structure.

“Loading has commenced,” came a message from the factory.

The **mines** had yet to be filled with **antimatter fuel**. Since it was so dangerous, antimatter needed to be poured in right before firing. A small transport vessel clung to the **mines**, loading them onto the battle-line ship one by one.

Maybe I can ask to pilot that transport ship, thought Duhier.

Thus did the battle-line ship *Caïsaumh* fit itself for combat. Fifty-two hours later, it set off in the direction of the **Central Disc Sector**, as part of the main force of **Twin Thorns Fleet 13**.

Chapter 3: *Tainhoth* (Ensnared)

“I thank Your Majesty for giving me your time. It is the highest of honors.” Teen bowed his head.

“Yes. Time is limited, is it not, Mr. Ambassador?” She waved her hand wearily. “While We do not hesitate to spend time observing the proper etiquette, We do not intend to give you more time than what was allotted.”

“Hearing those words makes me all the more delighted, Your Majesty.”

“Climb on,” said *Lamagh*, inviting him onto the **personal transporter**.

A **chamberlain guard** was already aboard, serving as both driver and armed escort. Teen looked at the guard with nervous eyes.

“Worry not, Mr. Ambassador,” said *Lamagh*. “A **chamberlain guard**’s most important skill is to *forget*. No matter what you say, it shall never leak from this guard’s mouth. If you do not believe Our assurances, then we shall spend our time on useless ceremony.”

“Heaven forfend, Your Majesty.” Teen got on the **transporter**. “Now then, if Your Majesty could allow me to get to the main issue.”

Lamagh nodded and signaled the **guard**. The transporter got moving.

“I think the **Chancellor** might have already reported to Your Majesty about the matter of business I wish to discuss.”

“Quite.” *So that is what this is about*, thought *Lamagh*. “If this is about the alliance, then you must have heard Our reply through the **Chancellor**. And you must know that We shall tell you the same thing.”

“So, **Your Majesty** is also of a negatory opinion?” Teen hung his head.

“An alliance is unthinkable, Mr. Ambassador,” said *Lamagh*. “We know We must crush the enemy, but what about an ally?”

“I suggest we share an eternal bond of friendship.”

At this, *Lamagh* smiled. “That is impossible, Mr. Ambassador.”

“Does Your Majesty not believe in lasting friendships?” Teen’s eyes were pleading.

“Lasting friendships between individuals, We can believe in. They need only last for a person’s lifetime, after all. A nation, however, does not vanish in such a short blink — especially Our **Empire**.”

“I hope my nation also lasts forever.”

“Naturally.”

“However, that seems a rather unfeasible dream.”

“And what makes you say that?”

“No matter which side wins this war, my nation will inch closer to the brink of destruction.”

“There is no guarantee that will happen,” she replied half-heartedly. She had no interest in the fate of the Hania Federation, nor did she care to conceal that fact. Refraining from stating it outright was about the extent of the courtesy she was willing to show him.

“It is all but certain, Your Majesty. Though I hesitate to say it aloud... it’s...”

“There is nothing to fear, Mr. Ambassador.” *Lamagh* had picked up on what Teen was struggling to get out. “It’s only natural for your nation to be thinking about what should happen if Our **Empire** were to fall. Thankfully, you needn’t worry your head about a future where the Empire has perished.”

“I stand obliged.” Teen bowed his head. “Forgive me, but if that were to happen, then the Three Nations would not let my nation go unpunished. They will attack under some pretext or other.”

“And that is when Hania’s mettle will be tested.”

“There are those who believe we can prevail. Just as **Your Majesty** implied, my country has held firm by cleverly navigating the waters between the great powers. For us, military strength is simply there to support diplomatic endeavors, and we take pride in that. Those among us who can’t jettison that pride claim that there’s no way the Three Nations maintain friendly relations with one another after the war is over. And if that holds true, then there will be plenty of room for diplomacy. However, we feel that is a naive read on the situation.”

“‘We’?”

“We, as in those of us who think that in the course of the war, your enemies will be rolled into the United Humankind.”

“In other words, you mean to say the other two countries will get annexed?”

This was not a surprising new take. The possibility had been discussed within the **Empire**. The UH was a nation born through the union of multiple different interstellar powers, and it had only continued to swallow up other nations as it expanded. In that respect, the Empire and the UH were rather similar, though the UH did differ greatly in that it lacked a “central race” like the Abh. As the Abh were wont to shoulder the management of the Empire, that fundamental nature of the Empire had never changed. The UH, on the other hand, had changed over the ages quite freely and flexibly. Nevertheless,

there remained a stubborn and unchanging quintessence at the core of the UH all throughout. If the UH were to absorb the PSSU and Greater Alkont, the nation would definitely undergo yet another slight transformation, but the UH would persist without the meanest impediment.

If the newly reborn UH were to then take in the territory of the Empire, it was eminently logical to suppose they would not leave the Hania Federation be.

“Is it safe to assume your nation wishes for the **Empire** to emerge victorious?”

“That’s correct. That is, with regard to this war.”

“And you claim that an alliance would secure the **Empire**’s victory, We take it?” As a courtesy, *Lamagh* kept her emotions from creeping into her tone. Otherwise, she would have sneered at him. “Regrettably, Mr. Ambassador, we do not know how to fight alongside someone else. When fighting alone, if one should lose, they die in solitude, mourned by no one. This is the way of the Empire, or more accurately, of the Abh.”

And she meant what she said. In all honesty, an alliance with the Hania Federation was unlikely to serve the war effort. Hania’s army was reasonably big, but they had outdated equipment and problems with their command structure. According to the Information Bureau, it would not even be able to defend itself in the event of an all-out war. As such, all an alliance with Hania would do was demand needed forces to be stationed in the federation’s defense.

“In any case, you needn’t be anxious,” said *Lamagh*, intending to end the conversation here. “It will take a long time for the war to reach its end. When it does, We hope it’s just your nation and the **Empire**, but I will likely no longer hold the **emperorship**.”

“I see. So it won’t end during my lifetime. But from the nation’s point of view, it has precious little time left.”

“Listen,” said *Lamagh*. She had a feeling his dignity had been wounded. “Should the **Empire** win, then your nation will be one of the two powers ruling over all of humanity. Has the Federation the resolve to hold their own against the Empire? The resolve to share eternity alongside the Empire? Or have you the confidence to defeat the Empire?”

“In that scenario, you could hardly call Hania a ‘power,’ Your Majesty,” he smiled bitterly. “If one saw a cage with an elephant and a mouse, no one would think they were living together. Needless to say, we the mouse have no confidence fighting against you the elephant.”

“Then do you intend to share the rest of time with us?”

“In a way.”

“In a way?” At last, *Lamagh*’s interest was piqued (albeit only

faintly).

The **transporter** was past the halfway mark. *Lamagh* ordered the chamberlain to go slower, though it was already only at around the pace of a quick march. Going from a jog to a walking pace wasn't that appreciable a change.

Lamagh's eyes asked for a more detailed explanation. Teen's expression turned yet more serious.

"From here on, I will be saying what I couldn't tell **His Excellency the Chancellor**."

"You mean you can only tell Us?"

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"We feel as though listening will hurt the **Chancellor's** feelings."

"I am truly sorry about that. However, it's a matter of the gravest importance..."

"Oh?" *Lamagh* chuckled lightly. "If this alliance has some catch, then that will be just another reason We won't accept your offer."

"It's nothing that will harm the Empire. That being said, in the unlikely event that the people in my nation learn of this conversation, I'm afraid I will be misunderstood as a traitor."

Lamagh erased her smile. "The **Empire** is not well-disposed to those who would betray their country, even enemy countries. Furthermore, our two nations are not in opposition. We admit that we are not on particularly friendly terms, either, but we do enjoy something of a fellowship. If We were to take up a traitor's proposal, the Empire's prestige would be marred. To be frank, Mr. Ambassador, your nation is not worth that price."

"Your Majesty misunderstands. It is simply a difference in opinion as to nations. If you call this a betrayal, then your nation is guilty of the same. And as of very recently, I might add."

"Now that, I cannot dismiss. You're not saying We had committed an act of treason, I trust?" Her lips curled once again. It was the infamous **smile of the Abh**.

"It happened after the beginning of **Your Majesty's** reign," he said, staring the **Empress** right in the eyes.

Lamagh's voice was firm. "We suppose We shall hear what this is about."

"The **Hyde Countdom**," replied the Ambassador.

"Oho. How intriguing," she said, from the heart. Her interest in their little chat was no longer faint. Far from it; once she surmised what Teen was getting at, she felt equal parts fascination and disgust. "In other words, as a part of the **Empire**, it..."

"**Your Majesty**," he interrupted, with shocking, foolhardy courage. "If you were to grant me the honor of inviting me onto the galaxy-famous *Gaftnochech*, I could explain in a little more detail."

Lamagh's smile returned. Only this time, it was a smile with a modicum of warmth.

"Very well, Mr. Ambassador. We shall bring you to the **Imperial Palace**. There are two others We would like to accompany us."

"Two others?"

"We shall summon the **Chancellor** and the **Military Command Director**."

"As Your Majesty wishes." Teen bowed deeply, his smile assured of his victory.

The **transporter** stopped. *Lamagh*, having just disembarked from the **Empress's ship** *Gaftnochec*, headed to the **Chamber of Larkspurs** within the **Imperial Palace**, and without a moment's rest. Normally, she would have been able to enjoy some solitude during her return trip, but the Hania Ambassador's ardor had robbed her of her blissful alone time. Yet this was no trifling concern.

"What do you think?" she asked, as she crossed into the Chamber.

Chancellor Brahsh and **Director** Faramunsh followed her from the *Gaftnochec*.

"It smacked of rationalization, but it was relatively plausible at the same time," said Brahsh. "From the beginning, the peoples of the Hania Federation have lacked much of any interest in space. The only reason they ended up colonizing multiple systems is because their population had gotten too big. Despite how similar their **landworlds** are... or maybe *because* of it, the majority of them are self-sufficient, with surprisingly little exchange between systems. If **planar space navigation** became impossible at this very moment, most of their worlds could cope. In fact, they might not even *notice*. They're only a federation to begin with because they don't want to fall under the rule of other interstellar powers."

"Ah," nodded *Lamagh*. She had never harbored any interest in the temperaments of the peoples of other nations. She was interested solely in the nature of their militaries. Apart from that, the most she was willing to learn about was their underlying political systems. She had no interest in their futures. She reigned over the **Empire** and oversaw its army. She was **Empress**. It was **lords and ladies** who needed to be preoccupied with the spirit of their peoples.

"As such," Brahsh continued, "the Ambassador's proposal isn't so outrageous. They want to leave tiresome **3-space** matters to the **Empire** and enjoy life on their **landworlds**. Of course, I'm sure they'd like to maintain at least a little influence in space, in order to safeguard their security."

"But there's no way we would allow them to do so," said *Lamagh*.

"Exactly. It would just be the next-best thing, from where they're

standing. On the other hand, from their point of view, if it ever became clear that they would get swallowed up by another power, it'd be reasonably wise of them to choose the **Empire**. They must trust the Empire to some extent."

Ambassador Teen's suggestion was that the Hania Federation submit itself to imperial sovereignty. It seemed as though if their dissolution was imminent, they wished to accept the **Empire** as its ruler. But the offer wasn't so simple — the hidden implication was that while they wanted to leave space to the Empire, they wanted to be left alone on their **landworlds** to rejoice in their prosperity. The Ambassador stated it would not be mere subservience, instead using the term "osmosis." From the **Empire's** standpoint, they would be absorbing the Federation, but from the Federation's standpoint, they would be instilling the **Humankind Empire of Abh** with Hanian elements.

The obvious question to ask was: if the Empire were defeated, would that not leave Hania in an even worse position than before? The Ambassador replied that Hania's fate would amount to the same in either case. The Three Nations Alliance would "liberate" the poor, poor **landworlds** that were sold off to the Empire, and the Federation's central government would be dissolved.

What the bureaucrats of the central government demanded in return was surprisingly miniscule. First, they wanted some of the bigwigs of the Federation to be appointed as the **grantees** of important star systems, following the precedent set by the **House of Hyde**. They didn't mind if the other systems had grantees appointed at the **Empire's** complete discretion. Second, since they weren't concerned with former federal territory, they wanted an unoccupied habitable planet. There would be those who found the idea of absorption into the **Empire** disgraceful. Those who endorsed the dissolution of the Federation would probably have reason to fear lynch mobs. Consequently, they desired a planet where proponents of federal dissolution and their kin could live out their lives in peace. Of course, if the Empire lost the war, then the fates of the planets where the **grantees'** houses and the dissolutionists lived would take a nasty twist, but according to the Ambassador, they were willing to take that risk.

Lamagh recalled the late **Chancellor**. He might have wanted to live on such a planet.

"What do you think, **Director**?" she asked.

"I think Your Majesty ought to reject the proposal," responded Faramunsh, his tone as calm as ever.

"Explain why."

"There are a lot of strings attached. We would have to send troops

to defend the Hania Federation, or rather, the former Hania Federation. But not before needing troops to disarm them. To tell the truth, managing the fleets would be a difficult proposition.”

The most salient condition behind the proposal was the Empire’s obligation to defend the Federation’s constituent systems. That was much more troublesome than the other demands. The **Star Forces’** operations would be severely hampered.

“We can’t do it?”

“I can’t say for sure,” said Faramunsh. “All I can say for now is that would be onerous. Might we be able to pull back on that condition somewhat? We just need to win in the end for them to be safe, don’t we?”

“Given they do so, would it then be worth considering?”

“Your Majesty needn’t deign to, for I would raise my hand in agreement. We would no longer need to worry about the possibility of Hania going to war. I would hold my nose and dedicate some troops to their disarmament for that.”

“How much would it help?”

“We could give the Command Headquarters staff three days of break. If we can manage the alliance without disarming them, then make that a week.”

“That’s not that much,” said *Lamagh*.

“We can hasten the end of the war itself.”

“By how much time?”

“**Your Majesty** might see it conclude while still on the Throne.”

“An abrupt finish to the war to end all wars.”

“To the generations to come, whether the war lasted a decade or a century, it will seem much the same either way. And if we live to see ourselves ending the war, we can brag to our children, too.”

“When that time comes, I imagine you won’t speak of the abundant tragedy and misery of the war, but rather focus on the crumbs of joy.”

“Yes. We’ll tell them ‘before you were born, these exciting and fun games called wars broke out from time to time,’” said Faramunsh merrily. “I can see the disappointment in the eyes of my unborn descendants as I speak.”

Lamagh chuckled. “Perhaps they’ll start some wars of their own out of jealousy.”

“That will not come to pass,” said Faramunsh, shooting her down over-seriously. “Not as long as the **Empire** remains whole.”

“I don’t think they’re likely to back down on the condition,” said Brahsh. “While it’s true that in the eyes of the **Empire**, it’s fine to be temporarily boxed into a single system as long as victory is had in the end, the same isn’t true for land peoples.”

“So the means are more important than the ends to them?” The Director furrowed his brow.

“No, that’s not it.” Brahsh seemed confused. “If ruling regimes change too often, then society will be in a state of disorder, and people’s lives will be affected. That is, the lives of people on what they care about the most, **landworlds**. They offered this deal because they decided that the **Empire** would be better at protecting their landworlds than their own interstellar polity. As defense of the landworlds is the whole point, they won’t pull back,” he grumbled. “People born in *Lacmhacarh* are too indifferent to the feelings of the governed.”

“Now that you mention it, your predecessor often said the same thing,” noted *Lamagh*.

“Those born as **Imperials** would find it even harder to relate,” said Brahsh.

“That may well be true,” she admitted. Nominally, she was the Lady of several **territory-nations**, but she had dispatched **magistrates** to them all, so she never had to face a **landworld** herself. She had never once thought about their happiness. But she didn’t feel an ounce of guilt. She just knew she was mostly clueless regarding the subject.

“Of course, there’s nothing to guarantee the condition is met,” said Brahsh.

Lamagh raised an eyebrow. “Is it not enough for the **Empress** to make the promise?”

“Not to repeat myself, but they trust in the **Empire** to an extent. That’s why they came to us with that proposal. That will be enough for them.”

“We’re not sure what you’re trying to say,” said *Lamagh*, bewildered.

“It’s not physically impossible,” said Brahsh.

“So you would have Us make a promise We don’t intend to keep?” Discomfort welled in *Lamagh*’s heart.

Brahsh probably took notice, but: “That is the best way forward for humanity,” he stated calmly.

“Is that really the case?” *Lamagh* knitted her brows. The unpleasant sensation in her chest had yet to be expunged.

“This way, we can minimize the number of deaths.” Brahsh shifted his gaze toward Faramunsh. “Isn’t that the most efficient way militarily speaking, too?”

“You’re right.” Faramunsh’s braided blue-grey ponytail hung down his shoulder. Playing with his hair, he smiled subtly.

“Once you requisition the territory of the Federation, they can fight as much as they want. It may say in the contract that we’re to

defend their lands to the death, but if the **Empire's** defeat is on the horizon, then that becomes nothing more than a non-binding goal, and they know that. And even if we were to hand their territory to the enemy, as long as it's temporary, we wouldn't necessarily be in violation."

"I say, Mr. **Chancellor**," said Faramunsh. "How strict of you. I will of course defend them to our utmost ability, and should they get captured, then that is unavoidable. That is what I was saying. We can't set up an utterly impregnable defense. When I said it's not worth looking into, that is what I was referring to. I don't know whether the omniscient and omnipotent god they believe in truly exists, but I do know that at the very least, we are not that god."

"Actually, the peoples of the Hania Federation don't believe in an almighty god. Their religion..." But Brahsh caught himself. "On second thought, never mind. So what is your concern, exactly? Your thoughts seem quite complex, Lonh-*Üalodr*."

"Wouldn't you agree there's a difference between Hania getting snatched away after we've put up the best defense possible, and abandoning them from the outset? I want the freedom to abandon the **portals** if expedient," explained the **Military Command Director**. "Complying with this condition of theirs would require dispatching fleets there as long as there are inhabited planets, regardless of how worthwhile it is to defend the **portals**, or even how possible. It's as good as offering them a sacrifice. You can explain it away through any number of similar justifications, but it's all just an illusion in the end. And what's more, we know that to be the case."

"But if that illusion brings the war to a quicker end, then it's nothing to be ashamed of. I respect the values of Lonh-*Rüéspéner* (His Excellency the Imperial Admiral), but I believe decreasing the number of people getting converted into clumps of plasma is more important... Besides," Faramunsh continued, "Earlier, you said that land peoples find it tiresome to have their rulers change too often, didn't you?"

"That's just the rationale as to why I think the Ambassador won't pull back on the defense condition. From our standpoint, another idea will come up. It would be absurd if scads of **soldiers** had to die just to ensure they live in comfort."

"Enough," said *Lamagh*. "There's no need for you two to be arguing whether the **Empress** ought to turn into a liar. That exceeds your authority."

The two officials bowed simultaneously.

"**Chancellor**, there is one thing you must bear in mind. If and when We requisition their territory, We must speak of the conditions that the Ambassador set forward. If We were to adopt your measures, then humanity would come to learn that the **Empress** of the Abh may

at times lie. The existence of the Emperor as one who does not tell falsehoods has been an immense boon to the **Empire**. Without this credibility, the Ambassador would never have made this proposal in the first place. And it only takes a single lie for that credibility to collapse. Thereafter, any who occupy the **Jade Throne** may no longer reign without expending the effort to convince others of their sincerity. It would break the trust in the promises made by the Abliars that Our ancestors built over time.”

“But that wouldn’t be much of a problem in an age where the **Empire** no longer has enemies, would it?” ventured Brahsh. “**Your Majesty**, this is ultimately to protect the honor of the Abliars. Or am I mistaken?”

“Taking that into consideration, We shall reflect on this matter.”

Brahsh bowed, showing her he had no intention of pressing his case.

“Putting that aside, what of disarmament?” *Lamagh* asked Faramunsh.

“I can’t give Your Majesty an answer right away.”

“Has **Military Command Headquarters** neglected to look into the possibility?” she asked.

One of Military Command’s roles was to prepare operational plans in advance, projecting various hypotheticals. Ideally, even if a situation considered outside the realm of possibility were to occur, counterstrategies laid out beforehand could be implemented. And while the prospect of a bloodless assimilation of Hania was implausible, it was not impossible. She felt that failing to foresee this scenario was negligence.

“Your Majesty has every right to scold us,” said Faramunsh, offering no excuses.

“No, it’s no matter. This is war. You must all be busy, too.”

“We appreciate your magnanimity.”

“Is refusing the proposal in our best interests?” she murmured, as though to herself.

“But then the Hania Federation will join the fray as our enemy,” said Brahsh. “The Ambassador’s sentiments are not shared by all the factions of his nation.”

Indeed, Teen had acknowledged that his opinions were not always swayed by those of the overwhelming majority. There was a faction vocal about joining the war. They made the case that they should face off against the **Empire** as quickly as possible in order to sweeten Hania’s postwar position. The reasoning claimed that if they won, they won, and if they lost, then the dissolutionists would get their wish. Of course, that way of thinking didn’t take into account the countless people who would die in the lead-up to the war’s end. If the Empire

didn't take in the Hania Federation, then the pro-war faction would gain steam.

"The **Empire** is now forced to choose between two different options," Brahsh underscored. "Moreover, those options weren't issued by a nation's unified will, but rather by a single agent of that nation, which is a problem."

"So even if We choose assimilation, they may be pushed into waging war anyway."

"It's a tricky choice to make," said Brahsh.

"We understand that."

"However," said Faramunsh, "if they do join the war, it will make it easier for the **Star Forces** to fight. It would be a different story if they didn't hamper us with the condition that we defend their territories to the death, but since they seek to, it would be less deleterious to us if we just let them join the enemy."

"Did you fail to project that, too?"

"We never thought we would have to defend any **territory-nation** apart from *Lacmhacarh* to the death. Of course, with Your Majesty's permission, I will have my people look into it."

Lamagh thought it suspicious. "Why do you need Our permission?"

"Simply occupying the Federation would be another matter, but the idea of defending it to the end without occupying it certainly isn't something the **Empire** itself would come up with. No one at Headquarters is foolish enough not to realize this is a request from an outside agent. Even if I tried to make it seem like I'd come up with the idea while drunk as a way to torture them, not everyone is so credulous as to swallow that. Though, polite as they are, they would pretend to have been duped. In any case, it would be tantamount to telling them outright that the Federation came to us with the idea. Of course, I'm of the steadfast belief that there are no rogues among my staff who would leak such confidential information, yet all the same, I hesitate to divulge this without imperial sanction."

"Your subordinates are also Our subordinates. And We also have that faith in them. Have them run the projections."

"As Your Majesty decrees," said Faramunsh, bowing.

"Now then, We suppose We shall turn him down and await their entry into the war. Tell Us you have looked into that event, at least."

"Of course, Your Majesty. I am always contemplating whether I go too easy on my staff, but thankfully, they are hard workers."

"We have never once heard word of your being an easy-going superior."

"That's because I expend all of my strength machinating so that such news never reaches Your Majesty's ears."

"Well, We shall leave it at that." *Lamagh* believed she had reached

a conclusion. Assimilating Hania came with too many uncertainties. And presently, the **Empire** could hardly afford to take a chance.

"I believe Your Majesty should accept the proposal," said Brahsh.

Does he intend to rekindle the argument? wondered *Lamagh* warily. She had started taking a liking to the new **Chancellor**, but if he proved sufficiently ill-mannered, she would have to remove him from duty.

"Let Us hear your reasons," said *Lamagh*.

"If Your Majesty would, please think about the effect it would have on land peoples. If the Federation capitulated without putting up a fight, it would come as a shock to the peoples of the nations we're battling."

"And what would that change?" *Lamagh* cocked her head.

"War-weariness would spread like a virus among them. Some might even surrender at the star system level."

"So, as We thought, nothing would change."

Traditionally, the **Empire** didn't particularly care if a **landworld** surrendered or resisted. Their main attack targets were **fleets**. So long as a nation didn't possess a structure whereby they could issue orders to fleets at the star system level, then the Empire wasn't especially relieved even if some provincial star system capitulated. In fact, it was disadvantageous in the short term. While that star system waited to be incorporated into the Empire's economic zone, they would have to be looked after in one way or another, which was a heavy burden on logistics and could even limit their strategic options.

"But it would simplify governing them once we gain total control over them. Plus... the People's Sovereign Stellar Union and the Greater Alkont Republic might follow in the Hania Federation's example."

"That's only in the case that faith in Our imperial decrees holds."

"Yes; I think it would be best to take up the Ambassador's proposal, even if **Your Majesty** must uphold its stipulations to the last."

"We cannot tie the hands of the military for the sake of a vague possibility," said *Lamagh*, her emotions stirred. "We want quantitative opinions. Can you gather that data?"

"Yes." Brahsh bowed. "We will calculate the possibility of the surrender of each of the Three Nations in the event the Hania Federation is absorbed. In addition, let's also calculate the expected values of shortening the duration of incorporating the occupied **landworlds** into the imperial economic block. Taking these things together, we can carefully examine our prospects of ending the war."

Faramunsh gave Brahsh a meaningful stare.

The **Chancellor** cast a glance the **Director's** way. "Needless to say, we will pay utmost attention to keeping this classified."

“If you please,” nodded *Lamagh*. “Very well; We shall reserve making a decision for later. Now, compile all of the necessary data, both of you.”

“With all reverence, Your Majesty.”

“As Your Majesty decrees.”

Brahsh and Faramunsh bowed deeply.

Chapter 4: *Saudec Sata* (Stronghold Portal)

“An **inter-bubble communication** from the **squadron flagship**,” said Yatesh, his words reverberating through the **bridge**.

“Read it to me,” said Lafier.

“All ships, assume the **stationary-state**. Over.”

“Emit the **roger-that signal**. **Navigator**, switch the **bubble** to the **stationary-state**,” instructed Lafier.

She gazed at the **planar space map**. **Trample-Blitz Squadron 1** had come to a halt, in a single-row formation. A number of **space-time bubbles** were slipping through the line of ships. It was a corps of **defense ships** which had been set aside until now. There also appeared to be additional forces pulled from a separate fleet.

Twin Thorns Fleet 24 was tirelessly attacking the **Kemar Portal**. The current stretch of battle had been pure drudgery, but signs of change were becoming apparent as of late. The curtain of fire was growing thinner — proof that the consumption rate of the ultra-long-range **mobile space-time mines** was exceeding their production rate. But of course, this could just be a ploy to make the **Abh** think that. It was possible the enemy was intentionally reducing the number of **mines** fired in order to portray their circumstances as more dire than they actually were.

That wasn't what Lafier was thinking, though. She was a mere **ship commander**. She could ascend to the **Jade Throne** in the future, but the only seat of power she was given at present was a simple raid ship commander's seat. And readiness in following orders was considered the greatest virtue of all those in her position. It was **Fleet Command** that needed to make the judgment calls, and the staff there had decided this was not, in fact, subterfuge.

The following barrage was also too thin. Only three **mines** had **fused** with the *Flicaubh's* space-time. And that wasn't all — there were no enemy ships, either. Unmanned mines were all they encountered.

The enemy hadn't sent ships to **planar space** during the previous offensive, either. The **Kemar System** was more than just a **mine** factory — it also housed an enormous **ship construction site** whose capabilities were nothing to sneeze at. Given that there were no large-scale battles up to that point, they should have been able to replace any lost ships without difficulty. That being said, while a ship could

be constructed in short order, they weren't so lucky when it came to crews. Chances were high that the enemy's overall war potential was on the wane, making the best course of action to await them in **3-space**.

But that, too, was none of Lafier's concern. What she had to focus on was very straightforward — blast the enemy on sight. For the time being, she would just see the not-so-exhilarating task of escorting the defense ship corps to its conclusion. Not that it was likely she'd even have to — there were still no enemy ships to be found.

“An **inter-bubble communication** from the **flagship**. All **space-time bubbles**, assume the **mobile-state**. Keep some distance from the defense ship corps in front. Over.”

Lafier nodded and issued her commands. And so their dull march commenced. As soon as the defense ship corps approached the edge of the spiral **portal**, they were once again ordered to stay put. This time it was the **battle-line ship** corps that came in front. They unleashed their bellyfuls of **mines** into the **portal**. After which there was still nothing for the raid ships or **patrol ships** to do.

A different **battle-line ship** corps got sucked into the Kemar Portal. Instead of **mines**, they were loaded with antimatter bombs. They were mobile within 3-space, but they didn't have **space-time bubble generators**, making them that much smaller than normal mines. As such, more of them could be loaded aboard ship.

Lafier had her doubts as to HQ's tactics. Was it really okay to put fragile battle-line ships on the front lines? With some anxiety, she watched the flock of **bubbles** enter the Kemar Portal. Then, at last, an assault order was handed to the patrol ship corps and the raid ship corps.

“Entering the Kemar Portal in five minutes.”

“This is your **Ship Commander** speaking,” announced Lafier. “This ship will soon shift over into 3-space. A fierce battle is likely ahead of us. Brace yourselves.” Then she ordered the engines and weapons to be inspected one last time. “All clears” filed in one after the other. The raid ship was in perfect order, and combat-ready.

“Enter the **Portal** in one minute,” said Ecryua.

“Start counting down from e-minus thirty seconds.”

The countdown commenced shortly. “...25, 24, 23...” Ecryua's calm voice filled the bridge as the tension silently ratcheted up.

Lafier strained her *froch* organ.

“...Five, four, three, two, one, passing through.”

Rapidly, the range that Lafier's *frocragh* could perceive expanded. A whole world popped into her perception. She felt slightly dizzy, as was always the case when transitioning from **planar** to **3-space**. She didn't dislike this sensation. However, she hardly had the time to be

indulging in the aftereffect of returning to 3-space.

It was as terrible as she'd feared.

There was no correlation between a given point on the planar space side of a **portal** and any point on its 3-space side. They never had any idea where on the **portal**, which looked like an orb in 3-space, they would emerge from. Even if they meticulously lined up their ships before entering the **portal**, the ships of that formation would end up getting separated on the other side. Without all the luck they could ever ask for, it would be impossible to liaise with consort ships.

Meanwhile, the defending side could arrange well-organized formations in advance. They could even line up multiple mobile space strongholds. This was more of a hunt than a battle. But that only made things more exciting.

While the **mines** fired from **planar space** and the homing missiles fired by the battle-line ships did wreak some damage, the tides of battle were not necessarily on their side.

Lafier tried to calculate the route toward the meeting point, but then she realized this wasn't the time for that. Dozens upon dozens of unidentified objects were hurtling toward them. They were probably **nuclear fusion shells** fired by **EM cannons**.

"Dodge them!" she cried.

Arbohf's **control gauntlet-equipped** left hand moved. He uttered not a word in reply, but Lafier obviously had no intention of taking him to task for that. Instead, she said: "All hands, brace for irregular acceleration."

Jets of flame erupted simultaneously from the starboard thrusters, causing the ship to skid. Groups of mobile turrets were intercepting enemy shells that weren't taking no for an answer.

A tremendous explosion ripped in the immediate vicinity, shock waves rocking the *Flicaubh*'s hull.

They may have pulled through the first attack, but they couldn't afford to stop for a breather just yet.

"Three ships approaching. Likely enemy ships!" reported Yatesh.

Lafier tried to grasp the situation. The battle-line ship corps was having some success, but at the same time, it seemed the damage the ships had taken was substantial. The remains of ships both allied and enemy were making things complicated, to say nothing of the clumps of antimatter that had yet to fully scatter. Lafier closed her eyes and focused on her spatio-sensory perception. Within the four-dimensional space floating inside her brain, a path to the meeting point presented itself. Should she trace that path without delay, or should she disperse the three enemy ships using her single ship?

The enemy ships seemed to be *boriac* (guard ships). Bereft of

space-time bubble generators, they specialized in 3-space battles. The **Star Forces** rarely ever deployed such ships, but using them in great numbers was a distinguishing characteristic of the PSSU. The Abh (who regarded **planar space** as the main battlefield and weren't preoccupied with the defense of star systems) differed thusly from those who conceptualized **landworlds** as the center of everything.

Moreover, they were heavy-class guard ships equipped with **EM cannons**. Their armaments were almost on par with the raid ships', differing only in that they had no **bubble generators**, so their maneuverability was that much higher. In 3-space, bubble generators were liabilities.

Annoyingly, a three-on-one battle was a losing battle. And yet if they tried racing toward the meeting point, they'd just get surrounded.

There was no time to ruminate. Everyone on the bridge was awaiting Lafier's orders.

"Arbohf," she said, "fire a salvo. You needn't aim with precision. Then race for the meeting point."

"Roger."

The **main engines** and **attitude control system** roared. The *Flicaubh*'s bow turned toward the enemy ships.

As a **gunner**, Arbohf wasn't thrilled he didn't have the time to aim properly, but he pulled the trigger anyway. **Nuclear fusion shells** launched from the raid ship's **EM cannons**. The enemy had also sent in its second and third death machines, but Arbohf's do-or-die piloting came in clutch, and they managed to steer clear.

The enemy dispersed in order to evade the *Flicaubh*'s attack, by which time the *Flicaubh* had turned around and initiated maximum acceleration toward the meeting point.

"Can we **information-link** with the **flagship**?"

"The EM wave noise is too loud," reported Yatesh.

"Can we contact them at all?"

While they may not be able to conduct the voluminous exchange of data that was an information link, perhaps they could simply communicate verbally. A slight amount of background noise wasn't going to bother Lafier's ears.

"I'll try."

The meeting point was shifting moment by moment. Without an information link, they were utterly lost. They could join with the other ships if they could just locate the flagship, but searching for it using one's *frocragh* amidst a battlefield full of countless moving ships was next to impossible, and not least because the spatio-sensory perception was hazy. And the ships' sensors couldn't work properly when the EM wave noise was this bad. They were practically caught in a fog. Nearby objects were clear enough to sense, but faraway objects were

blurry and hard to grasp.

The enemy ships were hot on their heels.

"Prioritize acceleration over everything else," Lafier ordered Arbohf.

"Permission to use the stern-side **EM cannons**?"

Shooting the two **EM cannons** jutting from the ship's backside might come at the expense of acceleration, if only slightly.

"Granted," said Lafier.

Arbohf couldn't stomach the idea of just fleeing, and zooming away in a straight line wasn't going to cut it anyway. Linear motion and uniform acceleration were as good as asking the enemy to blast them to bits.

Arbohf wasted no time employing the **EM cannons**. The enemy fired as well. Enemy and allied **fusion shells** passed each other by.

The largest possible jets of propulsor flames flared from the raid ship's port-side thrusters, and the enemy rounds ripped past. *Gnomboch* knuckled down and concentrated the mobile turrets' line of fire on the **fusion shells**.

At last, the meeting point came into perception. Yet there were no ships to be felt there. Or rather, the area was such a jumbled welter that it was hard to make out the ships that might or might not be at the coordinates.

"Communication circuit opened!"

Relief washed over Lafier.

"This is **Squadron Command**." It was audio-only, but the audio was quite clear.

"Commandant," said Lafier, saluting the screen despite the lack of a video feed. Perhaps they could see Lafier on the other end. More importantly, she couldn't afford to look sloppy in the eyes of her subordinates. "I'm delighted to hear you're okay."

"If you lot don't come soon, I might not be okay for very long," said Atosryua. "As a full-on information-link is proving a challenge, I'm sending course specifications."

"Yatesh?"

"Data received, ma'am."

Lafier nodded at her **Communications Officer**. "We've received the data," she told Atosryua.

"Good. I was afraid I might have to relay them verbally."

"I'm just as relieved, ma'am," said Lafier.

"Right now, the squadron... or rather, the ships that managed to gather together, are providing backup to the **battle-line ship** corps at the fore as they head to **planar space** for refuge. If there's any stoppage in communication, use that as reference to relocate the **squadron flagship**.

“Thank you, ma’am.”

Arbohf steered the ship in accordance with the newly-input orbital elements.

Lafier closed her eyes and concentrated on her *frocragh*. She figured they could join up with the rest in about twenty-five minutes — if, of course, nothing happened on the way there. Which was unthinkable. The enemy ships from before were still giving chase, and other enemy ships were also showing signs they were interested in picking a fight. The situation was dicey, to say the least.

They did have one thing going for them, and that was how allied ships were emerging one by one from within the **portal**.

“Arbohf, fly towards the vicinity of the **Portal**’s surface. Unless you can’t?”

“Are you winding me up, ma’am?” he replied, raising an eyebrow.

“Is that how that came across?”

“It depends on how far you allow me to go.”

“One thousand *üésdagh*.”

“You’re definitely goading me now, ma’am,” he said quietly.

“Are you game?”

“I don’t believe I have a choice.”

“Then make haste.” Lafier smiled. “*Gnomboch*, I’m giving you a new mission.”

“Yes, ma’am.” The young **Linewing** (needlessly) stood at attention.

“You must observe the surface of the **Portal**. Don’t overlook any frothing.”

“Roger that.”

“We’re counting on ya, rookie,” said Arbohf.

Froth on the surface of the **Portal** portended the arrival of some object into 3-space. Of course, in this case, that object could only realistically be a **Star Forces** vessel. They were all prepared to give their lives on the battlefield — but not if death came by way of colliding with an allied ship. It would be mortifying to have their names engraved in the memorial steles of the **Hall of Remembrance** over *that*.

Naturally, it was a dangerous zone for the enemy, too. Unlike allied ships, they might even get fired at. And at such close range, even feeble **laser cannons** could score fatal blows.

Ever since humans prowled about brandishing cudgels and bludgeons in hand, friendly fire had attended all combat, but now that the instruments of war had been refined to this degree, that danger was almost totally gone. But to the enemy, flying near the surface of the **Portal** required another sort of courage. As such, being here was reasonably advantageous, though that was of little consolation.

Just as Lafier speculated, the enemy was maintaining distance from the **Portal**. *It's a good thing they have common sense*, she thought. She must have been quite anxious; otherwise, she would have the latitude to deride them as boring.

With this, Arboh'f only needed to focus on going in one direction, towards the other side of the **Portal**. And yet his moves were very limited. Drawing any nearer to the Portal was a disaster waiting to happen, while drawing away from it would nullify their sole advantage. He could only move in two dimensions.

Doubt flashed in her mind. *Is this really the best idea?* She couldn't let that uncertainty show; however, keeping a stoic face was harder than she'd imagined, and she was as yet unaccustomed to it.

Her **wristgear** beeped. It was Jint.

"What is it?"

"It's fine," he said. The volume of his voice was low, so she had to bring her wrist up to her ear. "Your expression screams *this is the sharpest idea in the known universe*."

"You idiot. Don't twaddle at a time like this."

"My bad," he said, the mirth still in his voice, before cutting the line.

Then Lafier realized Ecryua was staring with an ambivalent look on her face. Lafier thought Ecryua was always expressionless, and this was doing nothing to budge that impression, but now she knew that there were several different types of expressionlessness. Or perhaps it could be likened to an almost imperceptible mask over the expressionless canvas. In any case, that second skin dissolved in an instant, giving way to what could be called pure blankness.

Is she seeing right through me? Lafier's shoulders went slack.

Fortunately (or not), no one apart from those two had picked up on Lafier's inner strife.

The raid ship glided over the surface of the **Portal** as it maneuvered left and right. Soon, they would arrive at the meeting point. Her *frocragh* could clearly make out what seemed to be the squadron flagship.

"Information link complete."

"I see," nodded Lafier.

Data had begun flowing in. Her *frocragh* indicated the position the *Flicaubh* was expected to be in, while her vision interpreted how the battle had progressed thus far.

"Follow the directions of the **flagship** at once. *Gnomboch*, your mission is fulfilled. Man the mobile turrets instead."

There were six enemy ships, while the *Flicaubh* was the eighth of the raid ships to assemble. Moreover, the Commandant was stationing the mobilizing ships such that they could encircle the enemy.

She couldn't spot any of the battle-line ships that were receiving backup. They had likely already escaped into the **Portal**.

The **Star Forces** were rebounding from the momentary turmoil.

"Welcome back, *Flicaubh*," Atosryua appeared on screen. "Now, quick, correct the ship's position."

"Roger." Lafier looked at Arbohf.

At present, the position designated by the flagship was slightly different from the position they'd received before the information link. An adjustment was in order.

Arbohf was given the same information, and he guided the ship toward the proper coordinate, which was a good place for bombarding the enemy. The ship arrived forthwith.

"All ships, open fire," flew Atosryua's orders.

"Fire!" commanded Lafier.

The **EM cannons** blasted their **fusion shells**. The main engines wrung out the maximum thrust. The lasers fired by the enemy ships' mobile turrets grazed the bow. An allied ship's stray round zipped by. The enemy ship before them exploded in countless fragments. The *Flicaubh* plunged into the bevy of shrapnel that was getting pulled by the Kemar System's stellar gravity.

The magnetic shielding couldn't repel debris, as it wasn't composed of antimatter. The hull took some licks.

An approaching silhouette pushed its way through the antimatter brume that was once the fallen ship's fuel. It was a consort ship, the *Cœlcaubh*.

The two raid ships passed each other by. By the time the eight ships of the Trample-Blitz Squadron 1 had finished their ensemble dance, the enemy ships had been reduced by half. And as far as her *frocragh* could tell, not a single ally had been lost.

It appeared the enemy ships were aiming to retreat from the battlefield.

"Damage report," ordered Lafier.

"Three mobile turret clusters have been damaged," said Grinshia. "There's no serious damage."

She checked how the consort ships had fared through the screen on the **console** of the **Ship Commander's Seat**. All seven seemed okay.

Will we be pursuing them? Lafier awaited her orders.

Atosryua's voice piped in. "Attention, all ships of **Trample-Blitz Squadron 1**. We are remaining here to secure the **Portal**. The enemy has seemingly lost the will to fight. We'll be on standby until the big shots get here."

Lafier heaved a sigh. Once again, they had survived.

Chapter 5: The *Bisozairh Cimna* (Empress's Decree)

"Number one, **space-time fusion**, enemy number 907 terminated. Number two, space-time fusion, enemy number 632 terminated. Numbers six and seven, too..." So droned the monotonous voice of the surveyor **Communications Officer** on the **bridge** of the **battle-line ship** *Caisaumh* — who just so happened to be Duhier.

Duhier was restlessly moving his tongue as he gazed at the **space-time bubbles** overlapping each other on the **planar space map**.

"...Number eleven, **space-time fusion**. Enemy number 915, no change. Ah, there it goes. Number twelve, space-time fusion, enemy number 336..."

"So far, so good," said **Hecto-Commander** Behrsoht.

"Yes, sir. Quite so," agreed *Cazzubh*.

Duhier felt hollow. The **mines** were certainly blowing up enemy "ships," the ripples of **space-time particles** spreading across **planar space**, but the enemy ships were mostly mines themselves. At least this meant their allies were protected, which was of some comfort.

"Is it all clear on your end?" asked Behrsoht.

They could hardly ignore a question asked by their **Ship Commander**. The **starpilots** on the bridge were endeavoring to make sure all was going smoothly at their respective posts.

"All right, next time we're unleashing the rest of the payload. Any marks around?"

Typically, battle-line ships couldn't choose their prey. Squadron Command selected their targets, and they simply fired as they were told.

"Not yet," said the **Senior Communications Officer**, *Bhonh*.

"What are you doing? Why don't you try shooting as you like from time to time?"

"Please don't say things you know I can't do, sir. It'd give everyone false expectations," said *Bhonh*. "Ah, the **flagship** just gave us a target."

"That right? Then input the specifications," he ordered, bored.

"Input complete," said *Cazzubh*.

"Now for sequential **space-time splitting**."

"**Splitting** now."

The **mines** had been catapulted beforehand, and were waiting

within the *Caïsaumh*'s **space-time bubble**. With his orders, they began to split off into their own pockets of space-time, one after the other.

"Number twenty-one, space-time splitting, number twenty-two, space-time splitting," Duhier read aloud.

Time ticked blandly on as the *Caïsaumh* fired the remainder of its ammunition.

Duhier's eyes fell on the **planar space map** once more. The **mines** fired by each of the ships in the **strike sub-fleet** *Gudersec* raced toward the enemy ships. The **patrol ships** and **assault ships** deployed in front started moving, but it was a hair too late. They slipped into the swarm of **mines** and pressed the assault.

Enemy ships fired their **mines**. Many of the blips on the map representing **space-time bubbles** overlapped.

"Number twenty-four, **space-time fusion**, enemy number 117 terminated. Number twenty-five, space-time fusion, enemy number 532, no change. Number twenty-six, space-time fusion..." Duhier continued listing off the fruits of battle disinterestedly.

In the aftermath of the **mine-on-mine** crossfire, allied patrol and assault ships sailed at high speeds through the frothing fabric of **planar space**.

Eventually, every one of the **mines** had ceased to exist.

"We're receiving a retreat signal from the **squadron flagship**," reported *Bhonh*.

Duhier glanced at the **planar space map**. The squadron flagship was already about to draw back.

"All right, that's a wrap for today," said Behrsoht, stretching. "**Total mobile-state**, course: 95. Follow the **squadron flagship**."

"Are we withdrawing from the battlefield, sir?" asked Duhier.

"What, you think there's something left to do for a **battle-line ship** without any **mines**?" said Behrsoht, surprisingly gently.

"No, sir," said Duhier.

Fierce combat was still underway far ahead of them. But in that warzone, a giant battle-line ship could only serve as a decoy. And currently, the **Star Forces** were not hard-up enough to have to rely on decoys. Any way they sliced it, their orders were sound. Besides, given their orders came from Squadron Command, the **Ship Commander** didn't have a choice in the matter.

But Behrsoht's gleeful tone of voice gave Duhier some pause.

Then Duhier felt guilty — now he was just inventing things to dislike him over. Those with the Abliar **surname** were taught not to levy irrational charges against superiors, as there might be superiors who, out of deference to **Imperials**, took those charges to heart. Though Duhier was pretty sure that wasn't a problem when it came to Behrsoht.

“You look disgruntled, *Fiac Lartsor*,” said Behrsoht, smirking. Duhier couldn’t bring himself to like that smirk. “Not at all, sir,” he denied.

But clearly, Behrsoht didn’t believe him. “Don’t get so down.”

“I’m not down.”

“Do you need to shoot down everything your **Ship Commander** says?” he smiled wryly.

“I apologize, sir.”

Behrsoht didn’t seem that displeased. “Listen here, **Linewing Abliar**. You can say what you want, but you’re a special breed.”

“Yes, sir,” Duhier acknowledged readily.

At least within the bounds of the **Empire**, **Imperials** were indeed special. Not so special they were wont to turn up their noses and throw the military into disorder, of course, but they couldn’t play down the fact they alone enjoyed the right to potentially accede to the Jade Throne. At the end of the day, it behooved them to simply think of that right as another one of their talents. And the **Star Forces** didn’t necessarily view concealing one’s talents as a virtue.

“Which means we who have been assigned next to you are *also* special,” he boasted.

“No, **Ship Commander**, sir,” Duhier replied reflexively. “I’ve simply been assigned under you, not the other way around.”

“Sure, on the surface,” asserted Behrsoht.

“And in reality,” contradicted Duhier promptly.

“Is that so?” said Behrsoht unconfidently.

“I believe so, sir,” said Duhier, though he felt his own confidence flagging.

“Does it even matter?” said *Bhonh*.

“It doesn’t matter to you whether you’re special or not?” asked Behrsoht, mystified.

“I know I’m special,” she replied dismissively. “I don’t need more proof of that.”

“Now you’re just shifting the topic.”

“That was not my intention, sir,” she said, nonplussed.

“See, we’re talking about different kinds of ‘special.’ You’re talking about the ‘everyone’s an individual’ kind. And I *know* we’re all special that way, obviously. We’re all Abhs here. The kind of special I’m talking about is, well... how do I put it... it’s about our status within the Empire, so, in short, I, uhh...”

“So you’re interested in career progression, **Ship Commander**, sir,” she summed up.

Behrsoht looked at her like she was a decorous cat. “You’re not?”

“No, sir,” said *Bhonh* flatly. “I’m just fulfilling my duty as **gentry** because the **Empire** is at war. There are far more fun things in the

world than riding on a **warship**."

"I know that, but..." he said deflatedly. "Don't you at least want to get to a point where you can set your own marks?"

"No, sir. No matter who we kill, they're people I've never met," she said bluntly.

Behrsoht looked taken aback. "You're being quite... well, to-the-point..."

"That's what war is."

"I don't want to be told what war is by a **soldier** who doesn't want to rise up in the ranks."

"And I don't want to be the person to tell you. I'm just clarifying what I think. Plus, when a **soldier** starts thinking about the nature of war, I don't think any good will come of it most of the time. At any rate..." But *Bhonh* clipped her words there.

"What?"

"It's nothing. I was just about to say something very impolite to a superior officer."

"Then mutter it to yourself so I can hear."

"It's a small man whose dream is to just be a *raichaicec saubr* (squadron commandant)," she whispered, but loud enough for him to hear.

"That's not my dream. It's just a stepping stone, the low end of what I'd like to be. What I *will* be, barring a premature death. As if my dream could be so paltry."

"Please don't reply to somebody talking to herself. Besides..." For a fleeting moment, *Bhonh* shot a meaning-laden look Duhier's way, only to look hurriedly away when she realized she was doing that.

"Well, I'll give you this," said Behrsoht, who stared at Duhier without any such self-consciousness, "it's silly to be talking about promotions in front of the kid who could be sitting on the **Jade Throne** one day."

The Throne, huh... If Duhier said he'd never thought about it, he'd be lying. At the same time, whenever he pictured the **eight-headed dragon-engraved circlet** that was the symbol of the **Emperor or Empress**, he invariably also saw his sister Lafier in his mind's eye. He couldn't imagine her paying homage to *him* one day.

It wasn't as though Lafier was the foremost candidate for the next emperorship, either. There were plenty in the **Eight Houses** who were closer to the Throne than her. And Duhier had only just taken his first timid, tentative step toward that office. He wasn't even sure he wanted to be **Emperor** to begin with. His father Dubeus, **King of Clybh**, once said: "While **Imperials** are born with a variety of obligations, becoming the **Emperor** isn't one of them. After all is said and done, there's no shortage of candidates." At the time, Duhier

hadn't felt particularly strongly about what he said one way or the other — he already knew, after all. In fact, he'd even wondered why his father would say something so obvious. Yet now that he was living among people who hadn't had much chance to interact with **Imperials**, the weight behind those words had become clear. It seemed that people, when near an **Imperial**, ended up psyching themselves up thinking that Imperial might become the next **Emperor** for them. None were ill-mannered enough to express that directly, but under all of that unspoken pressure, Duhier could very well end up regarding vying for the Throne as an actual duty.

Duhier remained silent. He could sense no one was expecting him to chime in, which was a relief.

Bhonh suddenly frowned and lightly held her **circlet**. “**Ship Commander**.”

“Is it a message?” asked Behrsoht.

“Yes, sir. Just a moment.” *Bhonh* strained her *frocragh*.

“Is the message from that **bubble**?” he asked, his **command baton** pointing at the bubble of an allied **carrycraft** on the **planar space map**. It wasn't unusual at all for a carrycraft to be on a battlefield, but it was in a noticeably odd position.

“It is, sir,” nodded *Bhonh*. “It's for you, from **Fleet Command**. I'll forward it to your **wristgear**.”

“A direct message from Fleet Command? For me?” he murmured, peering down at his **wristgear**. Then he snorted. “**Senior Communications Officer**, send an **inter-bubble communication** to **Squadron Command**.”

“What should it say, sir?” said *Bhonh*.

“On the orders of Fleet Command, this ship will be acting of its own accord.”

Bhonh briskly executed her orders. “Message sent.”

“Now then, **Linewing** Abliar, any idea where we're headed?”

“No, sir. I don't know,” he replied emotionlessly. He kept the “*how could I possibly know*” bottled up inside.

“**Ship Commander**, we got an **inter-bubble communication** from Squadron Command,” reported *Bhonh*. “They're permitting us to go solo.”

“**Senior Navigator**, fuse space-times with the carrycraft *Tocrurec* at once.”

It must have been the *Tocrurec* that had sent the **inter-bubble communication**.

“Could it be your long-time dream is about to come true, **Ship Commander**?” teased *Bhonh*.

“My long-time dream? What do you mean?”

Bhonh made to reply.

“On second thought,” said Behrsoht, waving a hand, “don’t answer that. I already know.”

“So, is it coming true?”

“No. **Fleet Command** won’t go out of its way to grant the dream of a small man like me.” Behrsoht looked at the **Senior Communications Officer**. “You look like you’ve got something to say.”

“May I mutter it to myself?” she asked quietly.

“You may, as long as it’s somewhere I’m not,” he said magnanimously.

“Can it be somewhere other people are?”

“Don’t ask for permission to speak ill of me behind my back.”

“You’re right, I shouldn’t do such a thing. I won’t ask permission.”

“I can’t put my finger on why exactly, but I’ve got the odd sensation I just got categorized as an also-ran.” Behrsoht sat down in his Ship Commander’s Seat. “Now to our next mission — transferring **Linewing** Abliar to the *Tocrurec*.”

“Me, sir?” said Duhier, surprised.

“Correct,” nodded Behrsoht. “Fleet Command has issued a summons for you.”

“A summons?” *Why am I just parroting him?* he admonished himself.

“I take it you’ve got some inkling as to why?”

“No, sir,” he shook his head.

“Come now, you’re young; there’s no need to hold back.”

“I’m not holding back, sir.” Duhier was perplexed.

“You ought to pout and say, ‘there’s no honking way.’”

“They didn’t teach any such mode of etiquette at the **academy**, sir.”

“I know that. I’m a graduate, too.”

While Duhier affected an overserious, stuffy personality as a shield, inwardly he heaved a heavy sigh. Honestly engaging with this **Ship Commander** would chip away at his sanity.

“In any case, just go show your face and come back.”

“Do you have an inkling as to why, **Ship Commander**?”

“I do,” he said confidently.

“What is it, sir?” he blinked.

“It’s your *Fiac* **title** that sets you apart. Unless you’ve got other special characteristics to boot?”

Duhier certainly couldn’t think of another reason they’d be calling for him. That being said, **Imperial** or not, he’d never heard of **Fleet Command** summoning a mere **linewing**.

“I just don’t know that being an **Imperial** is ‘special’ enough for Fleet Command, sir.” Yet his thoughts belied his words: *What else*

could possibly be 'special' about me apart from that?

"All that's certain is that this isn't just some courtesy call," said Behrsoht.

It would never occur to higher-level officers of the **Star Forces** to go out of their way to pay respects just because a grandson of the **Empress** happened to be around. The whole idea was an affront to the Abliar name.

"Yes, which is why I have no idea what this is about," he said frankly.

"Hmm." Behrsoht stroked his chin. "Looks like some sort of super special circumstances we're not privy to are wrapped up in that special status of yours, giving rise to special reasons the likes of a **Hecto-Commander** who only dreams of being a **squadron commandant** shouldn't poke his nose into."

I wonder, agreed Duhier.

"**Space-time fusion** with the *Tocrurec* in seventy minutes," said the **Senior Navigator**. The *Glagac Byrec Lobina Borperr* (Twin Thorns Fleet 13 Flagship), the *Chaicaï*, had sortied from the Ercohn Portal, but it was positioned far behind the war front. And the number of ships taken alongside it was so small, one would never think it was a fleet flagship. But the fact that carrycrafts fused with and split off from its space-time with frequency spoke to its being the flagship of a fleet in combat.

The carrycraft *Tocrurec* came alongside the *Chaicaï*, which was a patrol ship that was remodeled to serve as a fleet flagship. Squadron flagships had to participate in combat themselves, and squadron **command centers** didn't have enough staff to be distinguishable from other ships. **Sub-fleet flagships**, meanwhile, needed bigger command center installations, so patrol ships for use as flagships were mass-produced for them. When it came to **fleet flagships** like the *Chaicaï*, however, sub-fleet flagship installations weren't enough. Yet there was not enough need for fleet flagships to justify mass-production. As such, they simply implemented large-scale remodeling to patrol ships that were formerly sub-fleet flagships. They required enough space to carry six **conveyance ships**, and to contain conference rooms and other various divisions and departments (along with the living quarters of command center personnel), setting aside the space needed to house twelve giant **mines**.

In truth, not even that was enough, which was why the *Chaicaï*'s interior was constructed as something of an answer to the age-old question, *how many features could one cram into a small space?*

Duhier walked down the *Chaicaï*'s complex pathways. A **personal transporter** was too extravagant for a lowly **linewing**. Besides, as Fleet Command, they must have gotten many visitors from outside

using transporters.

Guard NCCs were standing sentry here and there. Granted, it was almost inconceivable a hostile would somehow infiltrate the place, so this was less about security and more about giving guard NCCs something to do. Also, it was necessary to furnish a fleet command center with a large number of guard NCCs in case some crisis took place.

Eventually, he arrived in front of the entrance to the **Commander's Bridge**, defended by **honor guard NCCs**. These were specialists in both security and ceremony, and they were selected from among guard NCCs and **airship NCCs**. Naturally, there was a tension in the air about them; it seemed they'd known of Duhier's coming — and his status — beforehand.

"Apologies, **Linewing**," said one of them, "but as per my duties, I must perform a body check."

"I hold your duties in high esteem," he replied. It was a canned phrase. He submitted himself without fuss to the body check, which was over in no time.

"Please excuse us. We shall lead your path." The honor guard turned his back to him.

The door in front opened. The **honor guard NCCs** guided him as they walked their distinctive walk. After several steps, one of them raised their voice: "**Linewing Abliar** has arrived."

The top brass of *Byrec Lobina* (Fleet 13) were here at the command center bridge. Almost everyone here had been working in the military since before Duhier was born.

"Well met, **Linewing Abliar**," saluted a woman with lips the color of fresh blood from a space on the floor a tier higher than Duhier. She was **Star Forces Admiral Cotponic**, the **Fleet Commander-in-Chief**.

"**Commander-in-Chief**, ma'am," said Duhier, saluting again.

"Guide **Linewing Abliar** to the **Commander-in-Chief's** office," she ordered an honor guard.

It appeared that with this, his business on the command center bridge had ended. Duhier felt it a bit anticlimactic, but he saluted and left. Upon exiting out the door, he spotted two guard NCCs; it looked as though they'd be the ones taking him to her office. Said office was mainly used for meetings and was spacious enough to accommodate all fleet command personnel. The room had high pile carpeting, and an ebony table large enough for a family of modest size to live on. Duhier was guided to the foot of that table. The two guard NCCs then stood at attention on either side of the door. Needless to say, there was no chatter between them. It was silent. Duhier placed his hands on his lap and waited in place. Since he was a tot, Duhier had gotten used to sitting straight and doing nothing of note while all eyes were

on him. His father told him that patience was the most important attribute demanded of those born in the Imperial Family. He also said that few Abliars were born with such patience. Regardless, Duhier was confident he could stay like this for a day or two if he wanted to. And it was all the easier since fewer eyes were on him. Not that he'd be left alone for that long — unless the **Commander-in-Chief** had a hankering for torturing an **Imperial**.

At the other end of the wide table lay the Commander-in-Chief's chair. The symbol of the **Fleet Commander-in-Chief**, the *Lach Biharérr* (Three-Headed Dragon) was embroidered on that chair, behind which hung the **Eight-Headed Dragon** in the **imperial flag**, as well as the intersecting twin thorns and stylized numeral 13 that made up the **fleet flag**, and the silver cross on black that was the *Cotponic* clan crest. This crest was famous among those of the Twenty-Nine Founding Families for its brusqueness. Legend had it the forebears of the *Cotponic* lineage took three seconds to draw two lines, making sure solely that they were perpendicular before leaving it at that. But the ratio of the lines that were drawn back then were passed down to the present day. The clan was rumored never to spend too much time undecided. While Duhier was used to seeing the *Cotponic* crest, there was something about that cross that always aroused anxiety in him. It made him restless, uncomfortable.

Couldn't they have made the cross's vertical line a little longer? Failing that, they could have at least made the horizontal line intersect a little lower on that line.

Criticizing the crests of other clans was an affront not even Abliars were permitted. Only Cohtponees could pick apart the Cohtponee crest, so no one breathed a word. Humanity's hope lay in either a heroic soul willing to break the taboo, or a Cohtponee being born with any sense of aesthetics. He had a feeling everyone would conform to that hero's artistic insight.

"Lonh-Glaharérr," called a guard NCC.

Duhier stood up, and saluted facing the chair.

The Commander-in-Chief was by herself. She breezily returned the salute and took a seat.

Duhier stopped saluting and sat down. That moment, Cohtponee said "Stand back," her voice quiet but clear.

"Yes, ma'am!" came a voice from behind her at once.

"Don't let anyone in," she added.

The NCCs left, leaving Duhier and Cohtponee alone.

Were this an imperial court, Cohtponee would have to show her respects to Duhier. While she was an **imperial duchess**, a rank of high regard even within the **Imperial Palace**, Duhier was a **royal prince**, not to mention the grandson of the Palace's sovereign. But this

was the field of war. Here, their positions were reversed. In fact, there was a huge gulf between a **linewing starpilot** and a **Star Forces admiral**; he could hardly look her in the face.

“An **imperial decree** has been issued,” she said, getting straight to the point. “And I reckon you know what that means.”

Imperial decrees bore the highest level of confidentiality. They were encrypted using the **Empress’s** own **wristgear**, and barring directives that were special cases, were not delivered via EM waves, but stored in **memchips** instead. The memchip was then inserted into a box, to be sealed by none other than the Empress herself. Only a select few **wristgears** — numbering fewer than a hundred in the whole galaxy — could decrypt the message. And there were more protections besides, like how the wristgear had to be worn by its owner when attempting to decrypt, and how the message erased itself instantly after reading.

Cohtponee slid him the **memchip**. “It’s stored in there. You should be able to access it.”

“Yes, ma’am.” **Imperials** like him were granted the ability to decrypt the Empress’s encrypted messages when they were appointed as **starpilots**. Duhier’s wristgear was no exception. All he had to do was insert the information inside the **memchip** into the wristgear and recite the phrase only he knew.

“What’s the matter? Are you afraid the password will get overheard?”

“No, ma’am. That isn’t it.”

“Then do it already. I’m a busy woman.”

Bearers of the Cohtponee surname were loath to put up with those who took needless amounts of time to do things, and this sentiment was coupled with uncertainty in the case of a boy who could one day be their ruler.

Duhier couldn’t help but ask: “Why are you giving me this information?”

“Your right to access this information arises from the fact you bear the **title** of “*Fiac*,” or in other words, that you are a potential successor to the Throne. As such, your direct superior hasn’t the right to know, and you should read the message with that in mind.”

Duhier didn’t feel that really answered his question. Just as Cohtponee said, he had both the qualification and ability to peruse the decree. That didn’t mean he was under any obligation to do so. Yet he hesitated to start piling questions on top of questions. Thankfully, the **Commander-in-Chief** picked up on this.

“Relaying the message to you was my idea.”

“I understand.” That was all she needed to say. If the Commander-in-Chief concluded that word should be passed along to him, then he

was obligated to know the contents of the decree. He still had no idea why he was being told, but it would be unwise to ask any more questions.

“Hold your horses. There’s more.” Duhier caught a glimpse of dissatisfaction at the edges of her dark blue eyebrows.

“My apologies.” Duhier actually felt relieved.

“What that decree suggests is that there’s a possibility my fleet will be given a mission of great importance.”

“Yes, ma’am.” *A mission more important than the current operation?* Duhier couldn’t imagine what that might be.

“Depending on how things play out, my fleet might become isolated away from imperial territory.”

He wasn’t particularly shocked by this — as long as the period of isolation was temporary, it was nothing to fret over. There were times in the history of the Empire when ships and people were left without a means of transportation to the fleet. There were even times when they were cut off from communicating altogether. But what did any of that have to do with *him*?

“In that event, we’ll be turning to you as **Her Majesty the Empress’s** proxy.”

“Huh?” Now that was a surprise. “Will I be in charge of the fleet?” He’d anticipated the day would come, but he wasn’t prepared for that in any respect. If he didn’t at least graduate from **military academy** first, the **soldiers** of the fleet would be peeved.

“If the time should come that we believe it best to relinquish the right of command to you, that is what we’ll do. However, in all likelihood, your role will be ceremonial. Making the final decisions is my job. I plan to give the idea some thought as I examine you at work.”

“Forgive me, ma’am; I have another question,” said Duhier, unable to hold it in. “May I be allowed to ask it?”

He’d thought he’d never find himself above her in military rank. After all, even if he made it to the rank of **Star Forces Admiral**, at that point Cohtponee would be either retired or a casualty of war. The thought that the day they would swap seniority might not be far off unnerved him. He just had to figure out what was behind her decision.

Fortunately, Cohtponee nodded. “I’ll allow it. Ask your question.”

“In case our forces become isolated, I understand that the highest authority is the proxy of **Her Majesty**, no matter the scope.”

“You understand correctly.”

“Then, if that unfortunate state of affairs does come about, wouldn’t that make you Her Majesty’s proxy, **Commander-in-Chief**?”

“There’s nothing stopping Her Majesty’s proxy from choosing to turn to a different proxy.”

“That may be what military regulation says, but what led you to that decision?”

“Because I’m afraid that, depending on the circumstances, this may be a long-term problem.”

“I don’t understand,” said Duhier, confused.

“That’s probably only because the ‘long-term’ you’re picturing is fundamentally different from the ‘long-term’ I’m speaking of.”

“What do you mean by ‘fundamentally different,’ ma’am?”

“You’ll understand after reading the message. If not, then there’s nothing I can tell you.”

I see. If I don’t understand, she’ll peg me as a fool.

“But there’s no guarantee there’s always an **Imperial** in a fleet. What would happen if there isn’t one?”

“You’re here, are you not?”

“Can I not speak in hypotheticals, ma’am?”

Cohtponee shook her head. “That’s not what I’m saying. If there’s no **Imperial**, then there’s no Imperial. That’s all. As you mentioned, I’d just be standing in for **Her Majesty**’s authority. But so long as there’s a better way, it wouldn’t be very sensible not to adopt it.”

“Is making me the proxy a better way, ma’am?”

“That hinges on your temperament. I don’t know you very well. In fact, all I know is that you’re a novice **starpilot** and that you’re **Her Majesty**’s grandson. I have no idea how suited you are to command. If I judge you to be unfit for the position, I won’t hesitate to force you out.”

“I’m relieved to hear that.”

“You lack ambition for an Abliar,” she said, glaring slightly.

“Have I failed some sort of test?”

“No. It’s too early to be drawing conclusions.” This was the biggest shock yet. A Cohtponee, withholding judgment? “Any other concerns?”

“May I ask you just one more question, ma’am?”

“You can ask me questions until all of your misgivings have dried up completely. That is why I’m spending this time with you now.”

*I see. And the **Commander-in-Chief**’s time must be as precious as an ice cube’s on a lava planet.* “What is the purpose of informing me of the operation details beforehand, ma’am?”

“So you won’t get out of joint when the time comes,” she said.

“...It will be a time of chaos, so we should do as much as we can get done beforehand. Also, we must take into account the possibility communication between you and Fleet Command will become severed.”

“Who would be around to ascertain my temperament in that event, ma’am?”

“No one. I plan to give you my own written orders before you leave the ship. The orders being to allow you to appear at Fleet Command in the event of an emergency, no matter the cost. You’re to hand those orders to the highest-ranked commander you can reach. If Fleet Command has been destroyed, that person will decide otherwise.”

“‘At all costs?’” Duhier stared fixedly at her.

“Correct. Allow me to underscore that that is no mere turn of phrase. We are to prioritize getting you there, even if the fleet is pulverized in the process.”

Duhier stood up, despite himself. “You mean to say the whole fleet would be *escorting* me!?”

“The orders to do so couldn’t be clearer.”

“I cannot stand by that!” shouted Duhier.

Abliars were warriors. He’d come to regard falling in war as a fitting end to his life. Even the **Empress** felt the very same. Of course, they always had personal security. Sometimes, when traveling on the **Empress’s ship**, several escort vessels came along for the ride. It was an Abliar’s heart’s desire to be buried by an enemy ship, not to be slain by an assassin or madman. Those escorts were akin to health insurance, and nothing to be spurned. Yet when the Empress was with the armada, she was a commander, there to lead the military to victory. The fleet didn’t exist to defend the Empress — it was the other way around. Moreover, Duhier was just an **Imperial**, not the Emperor. He was aboard ship merely to fight as a fellow Abh. There was no justification to be babysat like this. Getting escorted by the fleet made him feel naught else but humiliated. And while Cohtponee was a **Star Forces admiral**, Duhier didn’t think that gave her the right to abase him so.

“Displeased?” asked Cohtponee.

“Yes, ma’am,” he replied quietly.

“Sit down, **Linewing**.”

“But **Commander-in-Chief**...”

“Enough, fledgling. You’re still just a **linewing**, and this is my **flagship**. Follow my orders.”

“Yes, ma’am.” She was in the right, so he sat back down, but that didn’t mean he’d accepted all this. His bosom burned with blue flames of ire, waiting for a chance to overflow.

“Abliar pride is not something I can touch upon. I’m simply ordering you to put up with it, whether you like it or not. Unless, that is, you’re demanding we safeguard your pride in the same breath you complain about being escorted?”

“No, ma’am...” Duhier had no rejoinder.

“You can come to terms with it however you wish. If you fail to

do so, then you don't even deserve to be called a 'fledgling,' because entering the field of battle was a mistake to begin with. The **Star Forces** are not in such a state of ruin as to rely on un-hatched eggs. If push comes to shove, I'll allow you to return to the **capital** alongside the sick and wounded, so that you may ask someone to incubate you."

She was right. Asking others to protect his pride for him was unwarranted.

"I apologize, Commander. I will follow your orders."

"So long as you understand." Cohtponee relaxed her shoulders. "You look fragile, but you truly are an Abliar. That expression you made earlier made my blood run cold."

If her blood had run cold, she really didn't look it. He was also less than pleased to be called "fragile," but he decided to keep quiet for the time being. That being said, had he really pulled that scary a face?

"Do you think the chances we get isolated are high, *Lonh*?" asked Duhier.

"I don't know," she replied. "There are too many uncertainties at play. And even if I did know, telling you now might foment unneeded confusion."

"Understood, ma'am."

"No more misgivings, I take it?"

"To be honest, I'm still unconvinced by your reasoning, **Your Excellency**. However, reading the decree may dispel my doubts, so I'll keep them to myself for now."

"Very well. Now then, decode it."

Duhier began doing just that. He decrypted and read it in nary a moment.

"This..."

"What do you think?" A smile graced her venom-red lips.

He couldn't put what was festering in his heart into words just yet.

"I mean..." he stammered, "this isn't written in stone, right?"

"It's possible this directive comes to no avail."

The **imperial decree** stated that the fleet should conduct preparatory research into occupying the Hania Federation and disarming its military. The preparatory research was written in stone, but it wasn't clear whether or not that research would be utilized.

"**Her Majesty** is being unreasonable. How can they make us look into such a thing without telling us what for? They could even give us a fake reason for the length of the preparatory stage if they wanted to. But no reason at all?"

Duhier was relieved to know that even Cohtponee grumbled from time to time.

“The **Chief of Staff** must be aware,” said Duhier.

“Correct. Which helps,” she smiled. “Leading on her subordinates is her whole job.”

“What you’re telling me at this stage is... you think the directive *won’t* come to no avail, Commander?”

“I don’t know. I’m just a frontline commander. That’s beyond my rank. This isn’t self-deprecation, mind you. I’m just saying that the range of my work is limited. I can’t prepare for any and all situations, but I’m just coming as close as I can to it within that limited scope.”

“So my mission at this stage is to make a mental note of this decree, correct?” asked Duhier.

“Correct. And no notes besides mental ones.”

“I know, ma’am.” Naturally, he didn’t divulge this to anybody.

“Return the **memchip** and erase the decoded contents.” Duhier did as he was told. “Farewell, **Linewing**. Return to your ship.”

Duhier saluted, and made to exit. Then something dawned on him, and he looked back at her. “Commander, don’t tell me...” But he couldn’t finish that sentence.

“Don’t tell you what?”

“No, it’s nothing. Forgive me.” Duhier saluted once more before making for the door again.

“**Linewing**,” she stopped him. “I only deem kneeling acceptable when it’s before the **Jade Throne**. And I have no desire to install a provisional throne in my **flagship**, even if I could grasp absolute military power at its side. As such, I hope we don’t meet again until after the operation is over.”

“I would like to see you again, but not as an ornament draped over a provisional throne.”

“I’ll be happy to see you if, when next we meet, you’ve graduated from a fledgling,” said Cohtponee.

Chapter 6: *Gronile Bitymr* (By the Lake)

The battle in the Kemar System had let up for the time being. The **Kemar Portal** was under the **Imperial Star Forces**' complete control. That was not to say they had driven out the enemy from all corners of the system. The enemy was lurking in certain sectors, awaiting their chance to counterattack.

The theater that was thought to possess especial war potential was Akadd. Akadd was a giant gas planet with a number of satellites, which were what made Kemar a munitions-centric star system boasting a concentration of factories and resource mining operations. The **Star Forces** had laid hold of the inner planets.

After securing a star, it was customary to set up **mobile antimatter fuel factories**. They also assembled **repair ships**, *réboniac* (food supply ships), and *garymiac* (medic ships) in orbit above each of the planets they secured.

The ships of **Trample-Blitz Squadron 1** had moored alongside the repair ships to undergo servicing. While there was a pause in hostilities, it wasn't yet safe enough to be setting up **mobile base canteens**. But there were over ten **supply ships** to serve as replacements, revolving around the second planet of the Kemar System, Menderess. Instead of goods and commodities, the supply ships (all *Cetairh*-class) were packed with restaurants, bars, fitness facilities, game halls, theaters, aquariums, museums, zoos, and other recreational facilities that could be established within cramped vessels. These supply ships were small models meant to accompany recon sub-fleets, so they were highly maneuverable, and had the same level of armaments as **defense ships**. In the event of an enemy attack, they could break away from the battlefield with the **soldiers** (sluggish after a few days off) still aboard.

One of those ships, the *Batcetairh*, had a peculiar interior design — it had been made a park. The five-story *zocrh déür* (garden deck) within the ship was 10 *üésdagh* long and 2 *üésdagh* wide. Three of the decks were further demarcated, but two weren't. Trample-Blitz Squadron 1 had reserved *Zocrh Déür Gona* (Garden Deck 4), also known as the *Üäpaiss Gronile Bitymr* (Lakeside Space) for the day.

"First," said the **Commandant**, **Kilo-Commander** Atosryua, "a moment of silence for the **soldiers**, both enemy and allied, that fell in

battle.”

Over two hundred soldiers lowered their heads, a solemn pall of silence enveloping the place. Atosryua was standing atop a slightly raised tier relative to the rest. It was more of a tiny mound than anything else, and that mound was covered by *ticrebh* (carpet grass), grass genetically engineered to be short and not to wither when tread upon. It also allowed for small flowers to bloom. The flowers *would* get crushed underfoot, but the grass was such that new flowers would bloom in a few dozen minutes’ time. The soldiers were also standing on that carpet of grass.

Garden Deck 4 was divided into the carpet grass section and the pond. The lawn was dotted sparsely with trees. The ceiling and walls projected imagery that gave them the illusion of standing on a vast lake shore under an endless blue sky. There were animals, too, and they were no illusions. The shrill and noisy birds stood out in particular — apparently, they were incapable of reading the room. One of these birds was chirping especially irksomely, dashing the mood.

“The moment of silence is now over,” she said, a little indignantly. But her next command was stated with majesty and dignity: “All hands, prepare for the toast.”

Between the pond and where the **soldiers** were standing lay dozens of flawless tables, each with cups and eighty-eight different types of beverage on offer. The soldiers briskly scattered to grab their cups and pour their preferred drinks. Next to Atosryua stood the top brass of the **squadron**, and they had their own tables prepared for them. Jint took a glass and poured himself some rose-colored *rorteccec* (wyne).

A hand from beside him. It was Lafier.

“What do you wanna drink?” he asked, noticing the cup in her hand.

“I’d like it if you could cut *caitecec* (mead) with *réltérh* (apple brandy) for me.”

“Shouldn’t you at least be cutting **apple brandy** with **mead**?”

“I see your taste is lacking,” she replied, looking at him wonderingly. “That would be far too sweet.”

“You’re right. Forget I said anything.”

All Abhs, without exception, could handle their liquor and then some. The alcohol in their bloodstreams was systematically broken down. Jint’s body could hardly keep up. The Abhs around him were drinking quantities the sight of which made him queasy. Yet they never got drunk. Samson would call it a curse, and Jint had to wonder what the point of drinking the stuff even was for the Abh. Though the anti-Abh crowd claimed Abhs were just mimicking real human beings,

Jint figured that if that were the case, they'd need to feign drunkenness.

Jint took her cup and made to pour her some **mead**.

"That's not how you do it," she stopped him. "You need to dip in the stirring rod."

"Say what now?"

"Then you use it to stir the brandy. Everyone knows that."

"For real?" Jint thought he'd adapted to Abh society, but he clearly still had a ways to go. "But then, there's no reason to stir it, is there? Unless that's what cutting is?"

"It's in the flavor."

"Ah." He made the drink she ordered and handed it over.

Similar kerfuffles were occurring here and there, and the preparations for the toast took longer than he expected. It appeared there were more than a few who liked their drinks a certain way.

Atosryua had her **apple cider**-filled cup in hand soon enough, but she waited patiently for her subordinates to finish choosing.

"Preparations for the toast are complete, Commandant," said Sobash, who was holding something green.

"Lend me your ears, my valiant **soldiers**," she began. "Well, not that being valiant matters much today, but just take the compliment. **Trample-Blitz Squadron 1** may be a valiant band of soldiers, but it doesn't have any traditions to match, so we have the duty and right to create some. Today, a new page will be added to that ledger of traditions."

Jint was listening to her speech while standing nearby.

"We have a lot of new officers, so allow me to throw light on Tradition Number One. At the banquets of **Trample-Blitz Squadron 1**, there is to be no saluting. That does not mean you may fail to pay your superiors, colleagues and subordinates due respect. And I shall invite any who are rude to *me* to my domain. I'll prepare you a room between the **cultivation ranch** and the **hydroponics**."

"What sort of rude behavior should we do in order to receive such a wonderful punishment?" asked somebody from among the soldiers.

"That you'll have to come up with on your own. But let me inform you that that room was created as a prison cell. It's a place of solitude, though I suppose that some of you may enjoy that."

There were some groans, but they were somewhat amused groans.

"The next tradition: you may not play with your food.

Occasionally, there are those who seem intent on treating the food without respect. It seems as though in some cultural spheres, smearing *badhorh* (creamsweets) all over someone is an act of significance. It may be some sort of religious notion, but in any case, I don't understand the impulse. Of course, I'm not so uncultured as to

immediately repudiate any cultural touchstone I can't seem to grasp, but I, *Lauic*, the **Baroness of Febdash** and the first-ever commanding officer of this squadron, hereby forbid it forevermore. If your religion requires you to throw food at someone, do it out of sight. Got it?"

No one protested.

"Now then, the new tradition we will be introducing is very simple. Whenever there's a **grandee** in the squadron, that grandee will treat everyone when given the opportunity. We'll have them carry out their noble duties. And may this beautiful tradition stand firm for all time."

Shouts of joy and cheering erupted. At present, there was only one grandee in **Trample-Blitz Squadron 1**, and that was the **Count of Hyde**. If she'd said "nobles" instead of "grandeess," more people would have qualified. For example, Atosryua herself was the **Baroness of Febdash**. But she was a **lady**, not a **grandee**. Grandeesss were nobles who headed star systems with inhabited planets.

Incidentally, Jint had not been consulted in the creation of this new tradition. In fact, Atosryua had not consulted a single other soul. *Talk about unreasonable*, he thought. The money wasn't the issue. The revenue he earned from the **Hyde Countdom** was enormous. Most of it was reinvested back into Hyde, but Jint's share was still too vast for him to ever spend it all. He could hold a banquet of this scale every week if he so desired.

But money wasn't all that was being asked of him. If he was going to pay for it, why did he need to be the one behind the arrangements, too? He was a **clerk**, and clerks (along with **inspector supervisors**) were busier when *not* voyaging. In fact, reserving the garden deck and holding a banquet was Jint's idea. In truth, garden decks were unpopular among people from **landworlds**. Landworlds were very diverse, after all, and the simulated environment inside a supply ship didn't do much to remind Landers of their homes. Only a planet of considerable surface area could hope to do that. Moreover, some Landers insisted with fists shaken in anger that artificial environments were a sacrilege against nature. As far as Jint was concerned, however, it scarcely mattered whether the scenery was a pale imitation. It was just nice to see Abhs and Landers conversing amidst the hallmarks of nature every once in a while.

After that thought occurred to him, making the arrangements for the feast wasn't that onerous. But the aspect of unreasonableness remained.

"Now to introduce tonight's organizer," said Atosryua. "Everybody, give him a big round of applause!"

Reluctantly, Jint stepped atop the mound as the applause continued. He had to give some remarks, too. And as much as he

didn't want to, he also had to pretend he'd been more than happy to put on the party. *Guess that's just another duty of nobility*, he rationalized.

"I'll keep this short, so please, bear with me," he started, in order to win their sympathy. "I've put together this banquet as a token of appreciation for everything you do. Your being here is the fruit of your hard work, and your good fortune! I just ask that you take pride in that. Forgive me if I'm bragging, but happily, the **Countdom of Hyde** is doing well economically. As such, I'd like to have the honor of recognizing your services again sometime soon." More cheers and applause. Jint raised his cup. "In addition, I'd like to welcome you and the new **soldiers**. I couldn't secure any in time for today's feast, but I want to bring special **Hyde** spirits for everyone to try next time. Only, I'll be ceding the privilege of giving remarks to someone else. Now let's have a toast!"

"Thank you, *Lonh-Dreur!*" replied the soldiers in unison.

The clinking of cups sounded all throughout the venue.

"Now to introduce today's master of ceremonies. Come, **Linewing Gnomboch**."

"Yes." Judging by the look on *Gnomboch's* face as he approached, he was steeled for this.

"A round of applause," urged Jint.

The soldiers dutifully clapped.

Jint felt self-conscious, but also a little depressed. He had a feeling he was getting a glimpse into the charms of being a commanding officer. But Jint was a **quartermaster starpilot**, an administrative official of the military. He would never hold a command position. And he couldn't transfer to the **Flight Branch** if he wanted to — not without a *froch* on his forehead. Jint ceded the mound to *Gnomboch*, only to find Lafier shooting him a critical look.

"Did I say something off?" he asked, apprehensively.

"No. But I must say, you are a terrible person."

"Why?" Jint could only cock his head at this unexpected line of attack.

"Foisting command on a kid like that?"

"Being master of ceremonies isn't 'command,' and he's not a kid, either. Given that he's a **starpilot**, he's of higher rank than the majority of the people here. Besides..."

"What?"

"You've *aged*, Lafier. You know, now that you're treating people like 'kids.'"

"You blockhead."

In reality, *Gnomboch* and Lafier were only five years apart in age. The **Empire** was not so hard pressed as to be dragging actual children

to the battlefield.

“Your speech was humdrum, too. It was like you were playing salesman.”

“That’s just another **grandee** obligation. Or at least, that’s what Mr. Samson told me.”

“Ah. Being a **grandee** must be difficult.”

“Why’re you making it seem like it has nothing to do with you? You’ll be one too, one day.”

“If I do become a grandee, it will only be far down the line.”

“Guess that’s true.”

Lafier’s star-fief, the **Viscountdom of Parhyrh**, had no inhabited planets. In order to become a grandee, she would have to terraform a planet so that it could support a population, and that process took quite some time. Plus, she’d only have the wherewithal to terraform once she was retired — once she’d seen through her obligations as an **Imperial**. If she ever acceded to the **Jade Throne**, then that period of freedom would be delayed even longer. And that was assuming the war would be over by then. It was a project of the far, far future.

Atop the bulge of land, *Gnomboch* seemed flustered. “Um, we will be carrying in the food. All hands, please be careful.” Some food tables approached crossing the water’s surface, while others descended from the ceiling. “Please make way. That **NCC** over there, move to the side. And that **NCC** over there, please refrain from reaching for the food until all the tables have stopped moving. In addi — Augh! What are you doing, **Deca-Commander** Ecryua!?”

From where he was standing, Jint couldn’t tell what Ecryua was trying to do. The **soldiers**, for their part, were busy criticizing the food.

“Okay, understood,” said *Gnomboch*. “How about we do it like this: Don’t move from your current position, if you please. Remain where you are until I give the signal.”

“You’ve botched the arrangements, I think,” said Lafier, staring as the tables came gracefully down. “I don’t think this staging was necessary.”

“It’s my first time,” said Jint. “I’ll do it right next time. I thought it was a pretty good idea at the time, though.”

“Next time, you’d do well to give your remarks more thought as well.”

“I see...” said Jint dejectedly. “How would you do the speech?”

“Hmm.” Lafier tilted her head in thought. “I don’t know. I would have to be put in that position to tell you. Also, I’m not saying I think I could give more entertaining remarks than you.”

“Gotcha. Why don’t we put you to the test during the next banquet? I’ll be the guy pulling the strings in the back.”

“No thank you,” she replied instantly.

“Isn’t it vital for an **Imperial** to give speeches? Actually, forget as an Imperial — as a commanding officer.”

“I can give a speech when taking us into battle. But what do I tell a group that’s here to drink? Besides, I couldn’t subject the **soldiers** to what would amount to a practice session for me.”

“All right, then quit complaining.”

“I wasn’t complaining. I was just giving you my opinion.” Lafier raised an eyebrow. “Did you want to be *complimented*?”

“No, that’s not...”

“Very well then.”

Gnomboch’s efforts were rewarded when the tables settled into their designated positions. “By all means, you may now dine. The rugs and seats have been prepared. You may of course use them at your leisure. Please enjoy the food and the opportunities for pleasant chatting,” he said, audibly relieved, before descending from the mound.

“Thank you very much, **Linewing Gnomboch**.” Jint raised a cup to him.

“I thank you,” said *Gnomboch*, exhaustion written on his face. “I was nervous.”

“I’ll be relying on you from here on out, too.”

“Yes, sir.”

“What drink are you taking?”

“*Tīrec mlémr* (grape juice), please. I still need to act as master of ceremonies.”

“Don’t get so tense up there. You should enjoy it, the same as everybody else,” smiled Jint.

Jint made to take his cup, but someone handed *Gnomboch* a cup a moment sooner. It was Ecryua. Surprised, *Gnomboch* took it, and Ecryua poured him something without a word. Jint couldn’t tell what it was, but it definitely wasn’t grape juice.

“Thank you very much, **Deca-Commander**,” said *Gnomboch* dazedly.

Ecryua glanced at him, then left their side. Was this how she apologized?

“That reminds me, what was **Deca-Commander** Ecryua...”

But Atosryua’s arrival cut his question short. “Good work.”

Out of reflex, Jint was dangerously close to saluting. Not saluting felt awkward, strangely. It was like his hand didn’t know what to do. Thankfully, that hand was holding a cup. He lightly raised it in her general direction. Safe.

“This was quite the idea, *Lonh-Dreur*,” she praised.

“Thank you very much.”

“I don’t know when we’ll be returning to the **capital**,” said Atosryua, “but when we do, it’ll be my turn to treat you to a feast.”

“I look forward to it.”

“As well you should. If you ever feel like writing a transfer request, wait until after that banquet.”

“Ma’am, I’d never make such a request...”

“I must say,” said Atosryua, scanning the **soldiers** all around, “we took more losses than I imagined. I wanted a few more people here to celebrate with us. Though I want to spend my money in *Lacmhacarh*.”

“It’s just as we predicted beforehand,” said Sobash, who’d come to chat.

“Is that right? Just personally, I was expecting the fight to be a bit easier.” She sipped her apple cider. “And to think, the real fight is yet to come.”

“Is that so?” asked Lafier, her interest piqued. Her cup was already empty.

“Want another of the same?” asked Jint, taking it off her hands.

“Yep,” said Lafier.

Jint wet the stirring rod in the **mead**. While Jint made her concoction of choice, Atosryua was discussing an operation that Fleet Command was considering.

“Is this not confidential, ma’am?” asked Sobash, uneasy.

“I’m just speculating they might go ahead with this sort of operation. It’s not as though I was eavesdropping.”

“I’d like to ask you the basis behind that speculation, if possible,” said Sobash, his tone suspicious.

“Ah, I’m sorry, **Senior Staff Officer**,” said Atosryua. “That is classified.”

“I have to wonder whether such an operation would be effective.”

“It certainly would,” she said. “The enemy is holed up in the outer planets of the system, or more specifically, in satellites that were turned into strongholds. Even if I were **Commander-in-Chief**, I’d hit them with **raid ships**. In this instance, there’s no more effective method than opening fire on them from warships flying at sublight speed.”

“I see,” said Sobash. “But surely, a single squadron wouldn’t be enough.”

“Of course not. I couldn’t stand it if the mission were pushed on just us. But we’ll be the leading squadron.”

“What an honor,” he smiled wryly.

“That sounds like just the operation to test the limits of a **raid ship**’s acceleration,” butted in the **Ship Commander** of the *Marscaubh*.

Before she knew it, the Ship Commanders were gathered around

Atosryua.

They must've already tested that, thought Jint. *Must be a joke.*

"Here you go," said Jint, handing Lafier her drink.

Lafier promptly took a sip and gave him a nod. "Mmm. It's good."

"Good," he beamed.

"My, though, what a pain this star system is," sighed Atosryua.

"Who knows how many weapons will be coming at us."

"But men and women in uniform aren't so endless," said the Ship Commander of the *Chtucaubh*.

"Quite so," nodded Atosryua. "There's no end to enemy ships. Which means we need to make our primary objective taking human lives."

"That's war. It can't be helped," said Sobash quietly. "Man has yet to develop the technology to wage war without risking human lives."

"True," said Atosryua. "But there's a psychological difference between people dying as a result of sinking ships, and sinking ships in order to kill the people on them."

"That's a unique way of looking at it," opined the **Ship Commander** of the *Nacaubh*.

"You don't agree?"

"No, ma'am. It's not as though the way we fight will ever change, is it?"

"I suppose not," she granted. "That said, something just isn't sitting right with me."

Jint understood how she felt. It seemed the Abh had a tendency to regard the crew as components of a ship, at least during wartime. Jint hadn't grown *that* accustomed to Abh sensibilities. Seeing as Atosryua's father was a Lander, it stood to reason she harbored some Lander sensibilities, albeit not to Jint's extent.

"It just doesn't make sense," said Atosryua indignantly.

"It doesn't?" replied the *Nacaubh*'s Ship Commander half-heartedly.

"Kemar is the PSSU's largest munitions star system," she explained. "More accurately, it's its *only* munitions system. The nation's productivity is centered almost entirely in Kemar. So why would such a system be on the border with a hostile nation? That's the reason we have to go through such a hard time. Did they not realize that signing the Four Nations Alliance Accord made the **Empire** their enemy?"

"I think that's a history problem," said the **Ship Commander**.

"That system was their munitions system since before the signing of the accord. Granted, they did neglect to transfer it away after the accord came into effect..."

"I understand that," said Atosryua, interrupting his long-winded

monologue.

“Ah.”

“On the other hand,” said Sobash, “we have that lack of sense to thank for the end of the war being in sight, don’t we?”

“What do you mean? The end of the war?” Atosryua inclined her head.

“This system has lost any means of communication with the outside, so the PSSU has lost any ability to continue to prosecute the war,” Sobash opined. “From here on out, they must do battle using their stockpiled reserves, and they can’t possibly rely on the aid of their allied nations. Not when they’re stuck between the neutral Hania Federation and we of the **Empire**.”

“Are you saying the PSSU will drop out?”

“I agree with the Chief of Staff,” said the Ship Commander of the *Chtucaubh*. “I don’t think they’ll be able to avoid that eventuality.”

“In that case, I can’t really complain,” said Atosryua, though her tone did seem a little let down, in a way.

“I feel it’s rather a shame,” said the **Ship Commander** of the *Marscaubh*.

“Not enough battles for your taste?” asked Atosryua.

“Correct, ma’am.”

“It’s okay,” said the *Nacaubh* commander. “I’m sure the UH will pick up the slack.”

“I wonder,” said the *Marscaubh* commander skeptically. “In truth, the UH is fairly scattered as well.”

“If you ask me, our hope for a good fight lies in the Greater Alkont Republic,” said the *Chtucaubh* commander.

Both the United Humankind and the People’s Sovereign Stellar Union were commonwealths, with the lack of a sense of unity that entailed. Then again, compared to the **Empire**, they were the height of homogenous. For one, the way each of their constituent systems were tied by a lingua franca was unthinkable in the Empire. While Baronh was taught as a second language on most Empire planets, that was not due to some kind of official imperial policy.

However, the Greater Alkont Republic was a different story in terms of unity. Especially since the nation became an interstellar power, they fixated on the principles of **landworlds**. Their inter-system exchange was the most enthusiastic, and a robust and powerful bureaucracy bound those systems together. Which made them all the more formidable an adversary.

“What do you think, Chief of Staff?” asked Atosryua.

“I’ve always thought of myself as a merchant,” replied Sobash. “I just want to return to my principal vocation as quickly as possible.”

“I’ve always thought of myself as a libertine,” said Atosryua,

breathing a sigh. “I want to return to that vocation as quickly as possible, too.”

“What do you plan to do with your **domain**, ma’am?” asked the *Chtucaubh* commander.

“Once the war ends, there’ll be more than enough good **magistrates** to employ,” said the **Baroness of Febdash** impetuously. “Besides, my father is still alive.”

“Goodness, ma’am.”

“What do you think, **Vice Hecto-Commander** Abliar?” Atosryua asked the taciturn Ship Commander of the *Flicaubh*.

“I have never given my ‘principal vocation’ any thought, Commandant,” she replied.

“Well, I guess being a **starpilot** is just a stepping stone in the learning process for you.”

Lafier wordlessly sipped her **mead** cut with **apple brandy** (or at least, the drink she asserted to be such). Jint thought she might be asking herself what exactly she wanted to do.

“Oh no, I can’t believe myself,” said Atosryua, glancing at Jint. “This isn’t the place to be discussing military strategy! C’mon, everyone, let’s break this up. Why don’t you use this opportunity to deepen your friendships with your subordinates, **Ship Commanders** of mine? It might be a good idea to talk to the **soldiers** of ships besides your own as well.”

The Ship Commanders let out strained laughs before dispersing.

“Hey, **Linewing Gnomboch**,” said Jint, patting the **Messenger** of the *Flicaubh* on the shoulder. “This is your department. I’m counting on you.”

“Yes, **Vanguard**, sir.”

Jint then left that spot as well. The singing of (already drunk) soldiers filled the air — two different songs from two different singers were clashing. It was torture on the ears, but it was preferable to a fistfight.

Was this feast a success? I wonder, ventured Jint. The reason he reserved this spacious park was so that a little cutting loose would be tolerable. That would not have been the case in a normal commercial establishment.

“Lonh-Dreur,” called a voice.

There stood an unfamiliar **NCC**, likely a crewmember of another ship. Each raid ship housed just under thirty crewmembers, and not even Jint knew all of their names and faces. At the end of the day, Jint’s job involved looking after their meals and their health. And no one on the *Flicaubh* would call him “Lonh-Dreur.” They’d call him “Clerk” or “**Vanguard (Starpilot)**.”

“What’s up?” said Jint.

“Might we have a *délbónh* (songifier) on hand?”

“Would using your **wristgear** as one not cut it?” At times, Jint had a tendency to think of **wristgears** as truly all-purpose. After all, it came with some all but pointless features as well. Whether or not the ability to play music was one of those pointless features was in the eye of the beholder, of course. In any case, if someone wanted the musical accompaniment a songifier provided, they had only to leave it to their wristgear. They could choose from among hundreds of millions of tracks and tunes.

“It wouldn’t be the same,” replied the NCC instantly.

Probably won’t be happy just singing at high volume. This NCC wants to make the whole park rumble with an electronically amplified voice.

“All right,” said Jint. “I’ll arrange for one right away.”

Just then, another NCC came panting. “Please, get us one, too.”

“‘Us’...?”

The two NCCs began making their respective cases. From what Jint understood, one of them was a member of the *Cœlcaubh* and the other, of the *Nacaubh*. And it was these two who’d been competing with each other for the ears of the park earlier. Each wanted him to furnish a songifier for their own group of shipmates.

“That is true equality,” said the *Nacaubh*’s representative. “If the enemy is unarmed, we fight them unarmed. But once they’ve armed themselves, we can’t just sit down and take it. If we don’t match them weapon for weapon, they’ll just bowl us over.”

“You’re just being thin-skinned,” said the *Cœlcaubh* “We’re not fighting you. We just want to enjoy the magic of song.”

“Go ahead and enjoy it, then. We just want to enjoy our singing, too.”

“Oh, we will.”

While the two argued, NCCs from yet another ship came along. They must have found this amusing, for they too began demanding a songifier of their own.

Maybe I should get five or so songifiers, thought Jint. But he soon cast aside that notion. The deck was wide, but it wasn’t wide enough for multiple songifiers to coexist. If they sang different songs at the same time without voice amplification, it would be bearable. With voice amplification, even a fistfight would be preferable, and not by a little. At least with a fistfight, they could ignore it. He contemplated setting up a soundproof room, but then what was the point of throwing the squadron a party to begin with?

“Listen, I’m giving everyone a single songifier,” said Jint firmly. “*Gnomboch* of the *Flicaubh* will decide the singing order.”

“You mean the master of ceremonies kid — er, **starpilot**.”

Jint nodded and got them their songifier, inwardly apologizing to

Gnomboch. The songifier, a podium that provided accompaniment and amplified the singer's voice, came gliding over the water's surface. For a handful of seconds, he wondered where to place the thing, before deciding to situate it in the farthest recess by the pond. That way, he could minimize the damage.

The first **NCC** mounted the songifier and started singing a song from a far off **landworld**, voice drenched with emotion.

The second the song began, Atosryua came rushing over. "What is this mess?" she scolded him.

"They asked, I supplied," he said defensively. "I thought I'd help them have their fun."

"Which is great, but what about everyone else?" Atosryua stared at Jint's face, but soon she broke into a smile. "Fine. This is your feast. To be honest with you, I'm not sure what the **NCCs** enjoy. This might be a good thing."

"That's very kind of you, ma'am."

"That being said, it seems not all of the **NCCs** are enjoying themselves."

Sure enough, there was a group of people distancing themselves from the songifier.

"That's why I put the songifier at the very edge," he said boastfully, taking pride in his forward thinking.

"And that was a good idea," said a cringing Atosryua. "Just, ban the thing next time. Please."

"Yes, ma'am," he said, dejected.

Chapter 7: *Cfapercoth Chtoca* (Quiet Overflow)

At the **Chamber of Larkspurs**, in the **Imperial Palace** at the **Empire capital** of *Lacmhacarh*, a **planar space map** was projected before the Throne. The ***Clybh* Monarchy** was within the Hania Federation. *Clybh* was the monarchy that *Lamagh* herself was once the Queen of. Of course, the so-called “**monarchies**” of the **Empire** weren’t really monarchies. They were actually just glorified regional divisions, and the term “**monarch**” something of an honorary title. The main duty of a monarch was to manage one of the **portals** that led to *Lacmhacarh*. As such, they had far less authority than one might expect from the title of “King” or “Queen.” Yet the *Clybh* Monarchy bore a great deal of significance in the current operation. Within the **planar space map**, the interior of the *Clybh* Monarchy was alive with countless dancing blue symbols, each representing sub-fleets, squadrons, and other forces and formations.

The Hania Federation was sandwiched between the **Skeer** and **Bargzedeh Monarchies**, which were also buzzing with units, mostly concentrated on the border of the sphere of influence. But *Clybh* had more.

“I can’t accept this,” said **Chancellor** Brahsh.

“But why? I think this is the very best battle line up,” said **Imperial Admiral** Faramunsh, **Director of Military Command**. “This way, we can give them the double mission of defending the **capital** while also taking over Hania,” he continued, indicating the troops deployed throughout *Clybh*, Hania, and Bargzedeh with his **command baton**. “For argument’s sake, let’s shift them around.”

The symbols representing their forces started moving. Their main forces weren’t in any of these three places; they were in the vicinity of the Central Disc Sector. It was the corps presently named **Twin Thorns Fleet 13** which was invading Hania, before circling the edge of the Central Disc and gaining control of all the space up to the PSSU’s sphere of influence. Furthermore, in concert with Fleet 13, the troops stationed in *Clybh* would infiltrate Hania. The troops in the other two places (Hania and Bargzedeh) would mostly play defense, invading extremely slowly.

“Even if unforeseen circumstances come into play...” A new set of symbols appeared within the Hania Federation’s sphere of influence,

color-coded red to signify their hostility. This was a projection of a hypothetical situation whereby Hania became antagonistic. All at once, the red symbols moved for *Clybh*. But blue blips emanating from *Clybh* swiftly blocked their advance. It seemed the task of tearing through the bulky battle formation protecting the *Clybh Portal* was too much for Hania's military. After Hania hit this wall, Fleet 13 would go on the offensive and annihilate them. "...We could deal with it in this manner."

"I understand, but Mr. Ambassador wouldn't approve," said Brahsh.

"Approve?" Brahsh cocked his head. "Do we need his approval once the troops are on the move?"

"It's not a matter of whether it's necessary. But it would lower the chances of the plan coming to fruition."

"Then you ought to have led with that," Faramunsh smiled wryly. "But how so?"

"It'd be too much of a shot in the arm."

"Shot in the arm?" said Faramunsh, bewildered. "Regarding what?"

"Regarding the anti-imperialist faction. What else could I have meant?"

The Hania Federation contained both a faction that regarded the nation's integration into the **Empire** as inevitable, and a faction that refused to accept that. It appeared as though the integrationists held the reins of power, but their power base was extremely unstable. Though they'd said they wish to join forces with the Empire, it wasn't as though that plan had been propounded through public channels in order to amass a popular mandate. It was nothing more than a scheme launched behind closed curtains.

It went without saying that many were opposed to the nation's absorption into the **Empire**. In fact, in terms of numbers, anti-imperialists formed the majority, as Ambassador Teen had admitted. The integrationists just happened to have a hold over the organs of government at the moment.

"If we're too brazen about it," said Brahsh, "there's a chance the alliance partisans will gain power."

"I'm having trouble grasping what you're getting at, **Chancellor**. What exactly are you saying is being too brazen?"

"Concentrating all those forces in *Clybh*. There aren't that many within the monarchy at present."

"Yes, because it's surrounded by a neutral nation."

"Right. So, if we were to concentrate more troops here, it's as good as declaring our intention that the Hania Federation should no longer remain a neutral party. They aren't fools. If we transfer that

much force of arms to the border of the sphere of influence, they'll read the signs."

"I don't doubt that," said Faramunsh. While he believed Hania's military to be full of defects, he held the nation's intelligence gathering apparatus in high esteem.

"Then the plan would verge on the brink of crisis."

The faction that could not abide integration with the **Empire** could be further subdivided into two — the sub-faction that wished to maintain neutrality, and the sub-faction that wished to follow the Nova Sicilia Accords and join with the Three Nations Alliance. The alliance partisans were in the minority, but if confronted with the reality of the Empire's invasion, the neutrality advocates might join them, and with their forces united, alliance partisans might seize political power. That was Ambassador Teen's point of view, and it seemed Brahsh believed him.

"Do we have any other proposals?" asked Brahsh.

"We do, of course," said Faramunsh, surprised. "My subordinates are hard workers, after all."

The array of ships on the **planar space map** changed completely. The numbers of symbols within Hania, *Clybh* and Bargzedeh decreased, and equal numbers were added to the forces in the Central Disc Sector and the **Raseess Monarchy**.

"You mean to augment Fleet 13?" asked *Lamagh*.

"I'm afraid that won't be nearly enough," said Faramunsh, lowering his head.

"We will have **Twin Thorns Fleet 1** and *Byrec Lolya Borperr* (Twin Thorns Fleet 15) advance to the front lines and form a new fleet using reserve forces. They will inherit the battle zones of Fleets 11, 12, 13, and 14, so that we may invest all four of those fleets in the Federation.

"That sounds like a large-scale military buildup."

"Yes. However, our battle with the United Humankind is still at hand in this area. And there is the Greater Alkont Republic to contend with as well. If we were to focus our forces there, no one would find that suspicious. We are notorious for going overboard with our military, after all."

"With this plan, there shouldn't be any problems," said Brahsh, audibly relieved. "There's nothing better than a good plan."

"A question, Faramunsh," said *Lamagh*. "Would that line up not take time to set up?"

"Your Majesty is correct," nodded Faramunsh. "This plan avoids invading from *Clybh*. The troops stationed in *Clybh* will remain as they always have been, deployed in numbers to ward off a hypothetical incursion from Hania. Therefore, it's necessary for the

fleet in this area to execute the assimilation of Hania by their own power.”

The blips shifted. Unlike earlier, the symbols within the **Clybh Monarchy** didn't. They remained attached to the border of the sphere of influence. The four **Twin Thorns fleets**, meanwhile, split into two, flowing so as to enwrap **Clybh**. Due to entrusting the original mission to a new fleet formation, the invading forces would be hefty, but since the invasion path was limited, it would invariably take time to achieve.

“That’s not good,” said Brahsh. “The more time it takes...”

“The stronger the alliance partisans become?” said Faramunsh, in a mocking tone.

“Enough, Faramunsh,” said *Lamagh*. “We prefer it when Our vassals treat each other with respect when dealing with matters.”

“As Your Majesty decrees,” said Faramunsh, affectedly overawed.

“It’s as the **Director** says.” At least on the surface, Brahsh wasn’t offended. “Is there a proposal that will wrap up the absorption process quickly?”

“Yes, Proposal 3.”

A new **planar space map** was displayed, but it was only slightly different.

“I don’t see how it has changed,” said Brahsh, staring at the **map** with furrowed brows.

“It hasn’t, no. But the movements will be different,” said Faramunsh. “If we execute this plan, we can absorb them in roughly the same amount of time as Proposal 1.”

The symbols started shifting. The four **Twin Thorns** fleets split into two and cut their way into the Hania Federation, while units advanced from the **Clybh Monarchy** as well, filling the space between it and the **Skeer Monarchy**.

“I don’t think there’s any problem whatsoever with this setup,” said Brahsh. His tone was almost imperceptibly tinged with reproach, as if to say *why didn’t you show us this one first*.

“But there is a problem,” said Faramunsh. “We would be redirecting the forces defending the **Clybh Monarchy**. With this plan, the defense of the **capital** falls by the wayside. With regard to the Central Disc Sector in particular, we would have no choice but to leave it nearly empty from a very early stage of the operation. We very much lack the force of arms to both swiftly requisition the Hania Federation and guarantee the security of the capital.”

“Is gathering forces from other monarchies to *Lacmhacarh* not feasible?”

“This plan is already the best we can do,” Faramunsh explained. “The seven monarchies apart from the **Clybh Monarchy** have already

come into contact with the enemy, which limits the fleets we can draw from them.”

“So we are lacking,” sighed *Lamagh*.

“Unfortunately so,” said Faramunsh. “As Director of Military Command, I believe this proposal should be classified as a distant dream.”

“Is that so?” *Lamagh* rested her chin on the back of her hand and gazed at the **map**. “This battle formation is certainly fraught with risk.”

“Is it truly?” asked Brahsh. “I just don’t see how it differs that much from Proposal 1.”

“Now I shall display what happens if the Federation recalls it is a signatory to the accords,” said Faramunsh.

Red blips appeared and started moving toward the *Clybh* Portal. There were next to no blue blips left within the ***Clybh Monarchy***. The red blips dodged or destroyed their blue counterparts and infiltrated the Empire’s sphere of influence with ease, after which none could impede them.

“Thus, if the Hania military doesn’t mind their own territory getting invaded, and rushes toward the ***Clybh Portal***, we may not be able to fend them off,” said Faramunsh. “That would lead to the fall of *Lacmhacarh*.”

“You’re telling me we can’t defend it?” asked *Lamagh*.

“We aren’t sure. The enemy’s strength level is quite unclear. Picturing the worst-case scenario — extracting troops from all warzones but those troops failing to make it there in time — we would be unable to defend the capital, yes.”

“You’re being a real pessimist,” said Brahsh.

“The custodians of our forces must by all means be pessimists.”

“I may not know much about military affairs, but mustn’t the Federation essentially sacrifice their own nation in order to try taking the **capital**?”

“Yes,” nodded Faramunsh.

“Then surely that won’t happen!” said Brahsh. “Ahem, excuse me. But going by their own thought patterns, they would never do such a thing. What would they have to gain?”

“That’s not for me to speculate about. I am laying out the military possibilities, nothing more.”

“There are things that are technically possible in a practical military sense, but actually impossible for political reasons.”

“You’re claiming that the Federation won’t occupy the **capital** due to political reasons?”

“No. I’m making the argument that they wouldn’t hand over the star systems of their own nation, not even temporarily.”

"I hope that is indeed the case."

"It is the case," asserted the **Chancellor**.

"Is it, however, so out of the question that the alliance partisans might revolt? Even if they fold their arms and do nothing but watch, their entire territory will be captured anyway. In which case, they may think it worthwhile to occupy the capital of the enemy they so detest."

"If it does come to that, we can take it back, can't we?"

"We're not so sure."

"But we have forces here," said Brahsh, pointing at the Twin Thorns fleets. "Are they insufficient to take back the capital?"

"I'm telling you, we're not sure. We don't have a lock on the enemy's numbers. Moreover, the way the Three Nations Alliance is moving has us uneasy. If they coordinate their efforts, the forecast turns even murkier."

Brahsh was silent.

"How about we at least wait until our forces are prepared and in order?" pressed Faramunsh. "In short, we need the time to position an equal amount of forces in *Lacmhacarh* as are deployed in the **Clybh Monarchy**. Amassing that much ship power shouldn't take that much time."

"**Military Command Director**," said Brahsh, "when would that be?"

"Let's see. About five years, I suppose. Putting aside our ships, we have something of a personnel shortage."

Brahsh scowled. "Then we'd miss our window of opportunity."

"Another window of opportunity will come. Whereas we can't rewind the loss of the **capital**."

"While it's true we can't rewind losing the **capital**, I'm not so certain another chance will come our way."

"If it doesn't, then it doesn't. This opportunity fell into our laps out of nowhere; we couldn't have prepared for it. We may as well tell ourselves it never happened at all."

It was easy to tell that the **Chancellor** didn't agree with that opinion. "**Military Command Director**," he said, pointing near the border of the UH and PSSU spheres of influence. It was where the fleet designated Twin Thorns Fleet 20 was active. "I hear that the fighting in this area has settled down for the time being. Could we possibly extract troops from here?"

"This proposal takes that troop extraction into account, naturally."

"But... there are too few of them," said Brahsh, clearly unwilling to give up just yet.

"I ask you to understand that we cannot divert them all to another use."

"I know that, but as I said, aren't there too few of them here?"

"There's something that has been weighing on my mind."

"What has?"

"The mission in this area involves cutting off traffic and communications between the PSSU and UH."

"Yes, I'm aware."

"We had thought that UH fleets would come without fail."

"I received word that shots were traded there."

"They were, yet their forces were much scarcer than we had predicted. It was the PSSU military that did all of the fighting. We believe the UH is hiding their fleets somewhere. We must be ready for them."

"Forgive me," said Brahsh, "but is it not the case that predictions being off isn't that uncommon?"

"Yes, that is correct," said Faramunsh readily. "Failed predictions are not rare. In fact, spot-on predictions may be rarer. There are even those predictions wherein we can't tell what went wrong, even with hindsight. But so long as there's a prediction — during the stage before anything comes to pass — we must treat that prediction as though it is spot-on."

"I see you are a cautious and prudent man, **Director**." His tone was initially tinged with a faint sarcasm.

"I don't see the war ending before I retire from this post. It is my duty to make sure the situation my successor inherits is as unchallenging as possible. As such, I must be warier than a tightrope walker under high gravity."

"Do you think there's no way you could end the war while you're still at the helm?" prodded Brahsh.

*Ah, I see now, thought Lamagh. This man wants to be **Chancellor** of a nation encompassing all of humanity.*

That lust for renown did nothing to irk her. She was merely worried that that lust was clouding the man's eyes. She smiled: *I have the same problem, for I too wish to declare before **Crown Prince** Dusanh that I have liberated humanity from the specter of war forevermore.*

Luckily for her, neither of her two vassals took notice of her grin.

"I'm simply handling the issues before my eyes. It's for **Her Majesty** to deliberate on everything else," said Faramunsh.

"Indeed," said *Lamagh*, chin still on her hand. "We are deliberating as to whether to stake the **capital** on this wager."

"Your Majesty, don't you mean you are staking the **Empire** itself?" asked Faramunsh.

"They are synonymous."

Lacmhacarth, the **Capital of Eight Portals**. These portals connected the eight monarchies of the Empire to the capital, and by

extension, to each other. The **Empire** could not function without *Lacmhacarh* as its locus. Consequently, the vastest empire in human history had something of the character of a city-state as well.

“Too right, Your Majesty.”

“**Your Majesty**,” said Brahsh, “please keep in mind that the Federation also hangs in the balance of that wager.”

“We needn’t keep it in mind for the likes of Hania. It is as nothing compared to the **capital**.”

“But **Your Majesty**...” Brahsh started.

“We are staking the lives of Our **soldiers** as well,” said *Lamagh*. “That is why We are ill at ease.”

The **Empire** had already gobbled up much of the UH’s territory. Adding the Hania Federation to those gains, the Empire would reign over more than two-thirds of humanity. It would take time for the economic strength of the new territory to translate to military power, but that was of scant concern. Even without factoring in the political impact Brahsh was preoccupied with, the war would come to a close sooner than expected, which in turn would cut down on needless casualties. The lives that would be saved should the operation succeed were more than worth wagering the **capital** over.

“**Your Majesty**,” said Brahsh. “The scenario the Director went into earlier was the worst-case scenario. As I said earlier, that most likely will not come to pass. It is not in the national character of the Federation to allow that state of affairs to happen.”

“My opinion differs from his,” said Faramunsh. “I do agree that is the worst-case scenario; but things can, from time to time, hit the bottom and keep digging.”

“So you don’t trust in Mr. Ambassador’s words?” said Brahsh. “His comrades currently hold the important positions of power and wish to see their people prosper under the **Empire**’s umbrella.”

“You trust him, **Chancellor**?” asked Faramunsh, in chiding tones.

“His words are corroborated by the data, **Director**,” said Brahsh. “We have collected intelligence on the Federation as well. That is how we know he is speaking the truth regarding the political climate there.”

“I see.”

“We’re not just swallowing whatever Mr. Ambassador tells us,” he continued, his pride wounded. “Has **Military Command**’s analysis led to a different conclusion?”

“The political climate of other nations isn’t our business. I would not mind making my subordinates look into it as practice, were they free, but they’re already working overtime as it is.”

“Then why are you doubting me?” Brahsh grilled him.

“Do I need a reason to be skeptical?” said Faramunsh, amused.

"I've lived all my life doubting all things. In the **Empire**, a personable sort is unfit for the work of the **Military Command Director**. When I was assigned to the role, I was quite surprised, but now I'm reluctantly beginning to think I am fairly qualified. My heart is currently weighed with multiple suspicions and misgivings."

"In what way is it suspicious?" asked *Lamagh*. "Make yourself a little clearer."

"I think it's possible Mr. Ambassador is using our military for some kind of inner conflict," said Faramunsh. "It's not our job to pry into the inside story of another nation; I only know what is common knowledge. In that nation, the seat of power is to be fought over at one's own peril. And I feel Mr. Ambassador and his associates may be losing their battle."

"We got that feeling as well," *Lamagh* concurred.

"**Your Majesty!**" said Brahsh, shocked.

"We aren't saying We do not trust your judgment," she told him. "Just as this is a good opportunity for Mr. Ambassador and his ring, it is also a good opportunity for the **Empire**."

"Yes, **Your Majesty**, exactly," said Brahsh, bowing. "What the **Director** said was not wrong. The power struggles in the Federation are always fierce, and the faction that Ambassador Teen belongs to is losing its grip on power. If we let this chance slip from our grasp, the opposition will replace them, and if that happens, the Three Nations Alliance may well revert to the Four Nations Alliance. The fact that Mr. Ambassador and his associates have power, and the fact that they are losing that power, do not contradict each other."

"A Four Nations Alliance would be easier for us," said Faramunsh, "as we are always formulating strategies with that context in mind."

"So it would, in fact, be easier to deal with," said *Lamagh*. She had not forgotten Faramunsh's pet theory that it would be easier to make Hania their enemies rather than annex its territory.

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"But the fight would last longer for it."

"Yes, **Your Majesty**," he admitted. "There is a difference in preparing against an enemy and a neutral nation. If forces are used as defense, then it will take time to execute our strategy. Of course, it will take excessive amounts of time to subjugate Hania."

"And the death toll will increase."

"Only so that we may buy eternal peace for our descendants."

"But we can buy it now on the cheap," said Brahsh. "What need is there, then, to spend soldiers' lives for it?"

"That is the gamble."

"A gamble whose damage we can repair, even if we lose," added Brahsh.

“We have heard your opinions to Our satisfaction,” said *Lamagh*. “We ought to reach Our decision now.”

“Might I suggest Your Majesty need not rush to a decision?” said Faramunsh.

“I say imperial decisions are best when they’re swift,” said Brahsh.

“Faramunsh,” said *Lamagh*, “set the war fronts in order, and form a new fleet. The name of the fleet will be decided later. We surmise a portion of the **Twin Thorns** fleets will also bear new fleet names.

“Your Majesty’s edict is my command,” said Faramunsh, bowing his head.

“Brahsh, you are to confer with Mr. Ambassador and ask for more details as to the treatment of his associates. And you are also to ask them to disclose any necessary information.”

“As Your Majesty decrees.” Brahsh, too, bowed his head.

“If we are to do this, we must proceed with all haste. Are We understood, Faramunsh?”

“Yes, Your Majesty. Please, grant us one month.”

“Until the proposal of the strategy?”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

“Very well,” nodded *Lamagh*. *Faramunsh is not a man who wheels and deals. If he says he needs a month, then it must be true. I shan’t pointlessly rush him.*

“Thank you very much. Our preparation period will seriously affect the flexibility of our operations; is this amenable, Your Majesty?”

She was used to the forceful way Faramunsh phrased things. “It isn’t a question of ‘amenable.’ Just do it. And We trust We needn’t tell you to pay the utmost attention to potential leaks.”

“I understand,” said Faramunsh. “There is one more thing Your Majesty must deliberate on.”

Lamagh inferred: “Is this about who will be commander?”

“Yes. I believe that with an operation of this scale and significance, *Fiac Cilugér* (His Excellency the Crown Prince) would be the most suitable choice.”

“We have given him a different mission,” said *Lamagh*. She had already given the matter careful consideration and issued a decision. “Moreover, if we lose this gamble, We must have him come to this sector.”

Dusanh, the Crown Prince and **Imperial Fleet Commander-in-Chief**, was also the *Glaharérh Byrer Borperr* (Twin Thorns Fleet Commander-in-Chief). The Twin Thorns Fleets were executing their operations in two far flung areas, so the **flagship** *Sancaü* was moored in the **imperial capital** of *Lacmhacarh*.

“**Vice Commander-in-Chief** Cohtponee should suffice. She is the

commander of that area. We have already told her Our intentions, albeit implicitly.”

“I see,” said Faramunsh placidly, but he was fiddling with a braid of his ashen blue hair between his fingertips.

She had known him for a long time — long enough to know that that habit meant he’d taken offense. “Do not get angry, Faramunsh,” she said, to mollify him. “We aren’t saying We approved of the Invasion of Hania beforehand. It was just Our personal will. And Cohtponee understands that.”

“I am not angry, Your Majesty.”

“Then We shall take you at your word. We leave the selection of the **Clybh Monarchy** area commander to you.”

“Roger that, Your Majesty.”

Chapter 8: *Gac Snudna* (Keen Arrows)

“This is your **Ship Commander** speaking,” announced Lafier. “As you were apprised earlier, the ship will be entering super-high-acceleration for a period of eight hours. There will be a rest period of fifteen minutes after the four-hour mark, where we will assume standard acceleration, so remain seated until then; otherwise, you will be putting your life at risk. The **alarm** will sound one minute before acceleration commences. I am granting you a little under ten minutes’ time to prepare, after which the alarm will sound. Get your affairs in order in that time.”

Both sides of the **raid ship** *Flicaubh* were furnished with auxiliary engines. These engines were dumb things which existed solely to squeeze out as much thrust as possible. This, when added to the *Flicaubh*’s primary propulsion, allowed the vessel to realize the limits of acceleration that a raid ship’s design could handle. It entailed levels of G-forces that the **gravity control systems** couldn’t neutralize. Much like the astronauts of the bygone era of space exploration, who had no gravity regulators to rely on, the crew would simply have to endure the acceleration period.

Naturally, it wasn’t just the *Flicaubh* that had to put up with this torture. Each and every ship in **Trample-Blitz Squadron 1** was scheduled to do so.

“One minute until high-acceleration,” reported Grinshia.

Lafier sounded the **alarm**.

“All hands, be seated,” said Ecryua, all-business as she fulfilled her role as the second-in-command. “Check your seatbelts.”

“**Inspector Supervisor**, begin the countdown at the thirty-second mark,” ordered Lafier.

“Roger,” said Grinshia.

The seats transformed from chairs into shapes akin to cots. The vector of the artificial gravity was still pointed toward the floor, so it felt like they were being stood up by force.

“Thirty-second mark reached. Beginning countdown. 25, 24, 23...” Grinshia’s voice was played throughout the ship.

“All hands now seated,” said Jint. If there was somebody stupid enough to be roaming around the ship, there was nothing to be done about it at this stage.

“Enact the necessary high-acceleration procedures re the **gravity control systems**,” Lafier commanded.

“Roger,” replied Jint. “Switched over to high-acceleration procedures without incident.”

The artificial gravity disappeared.

“...5, 4, 3, 2, 1, accelerating!”

Powerful and eerie vibrations rocked the *Flicaubh*. Just as acceleration commenced, the **gravity control systems** worked at maximum output to create artificial gravity pointing toward the bow. But the acceleration outpowered it. A net of 10 *daimonn* of G-forces were pinning the crew to their seats.

Abhs were accustomed to changes in gravity, but this was an ordeal for **landworlders**. For one, there was nothing to do during the acceleration period. The crewmembers were allowed to fall asleep, but it could prove a restless “sleep.” Many had nightmares.

Revolving around the planet Akadd (alongside its satellites), there were the orbital construction sites. The largest of them was for warships, and it was where **Trample-Blitz Squadron 1** was headed. The raid ships, accelerated to 0.02 times the speed of light, would rush in and fire their **EM cannons** to destroy it. Operations didn’t get much simpler than that.

Of course, the fleet would be detected from afar, and the enemy would try to hinder them. That was why the **assault ships** that constituted the main forces of the vanguard unit went up close to the orbital factory cluster; they were now engaged with the enemy. Trample-Blitz Squadron 1 was a volley of arrows loosed upon the battlefield. And it was the sharpness of those arrows that would determine the validity of this strategy.

“The auxiliary engines are functioning as normal,” said Grinshia.

But that report was scarcely necessary; they could sense that that was the case. Even *froch*-less Landers could tell by this acceleration, these vibrations.

In order to lighten the load on Arbohf’s shoulders, the **Flight Branch starpilots** took it in turns to pilot during high-acceleration. The first shift belonged to Lafier. While all she had to do was fly it in a straight line, which was less than exhilarating, this was her first time piloting in some time. Her heart pounded, despite the dangers posed by their fast-approaching mission. But that emotion soon gave way to self-pity. To an Abh, this acceleration level was a gentle breeze. She’d need to crank up the speed to really enjoy it. It wasn’t “high” acceleration until it hurt to breathe — until it felt like she was wearing a neutron mass.

She was worried her sensation of soaring through space had dulled. She’d spent her precious and valuable leave period on a

landworld together with Jint, which she was beginning to rue, but she decided to think more positively. It had been a meaningful experience, so there was nothing to regret. Besides, there would be plenty of chances to pilot ships in the future.

Jint could hardly bear the pressure. Compared to when he was last on a **landworld**, his body weight was five times heavier. Even worse, his bones and muscles had adapted to the Abh **standard gravity level**, becoming weaker in the process.

The display surface of the **console** rose up before his eyes. He could feel the skin on his face press in as he looked up the circumstances of all hands. All clear. It seemed everyone was properly in their seats. If there had been someone who failed to take a seat in time, there was nothing Jint or that dullard could do.

He glanced behind his shoulder. There was a door far below. If he swiveled a little to the side, he'd crash down immediately. If the 1-*daimonn* **standard gravity level** had been in effect, he wouldn't have hurt himself falling from that height, but right now, he'd be lucky to get off with bone fractures. There were **NCCs** who were sleeping at higher heights than him, though they were probably used to it. There was no **gravity control system** in a **smallcraft**, so moving while assuming this posture was the norm. Sitting in the front row meant lying sprawled at a height equivalent to a ten-story building. Smallcrafts typically accelerated at 4 *daimonn* of G-forces, though, so this relatively high-acceleration had to be a fresh experience for them, too.

Looks like I really can't afford to fall asleep. Jint resolved himself for a rough time.

It was one of the duties of a **clerk** to mind the health conditions of the crew. And this was Jint's job aboard the *Flicaubh*. At the moment, no one was complaining of anything amiss with them, and the crewmembers' vitals, as displayed on the console screen, were all hale and healthy. Jint was hit by a sudden nostalgia as he recalled the time he spent with Lafier on their initial jaunt to the *Gothelauth*. Though that had technically been his second-ever brush with the world of the Abh, to him that was the first day he *truly* came into contact with it.

Man, I was so carefree back then. He'd had his reservations about stepping into an unfamiliar new world, but he hadn't been worried about possibly dying. Of course, he had the option of throwing away his **noble rank** and thereby doing away with his military obligations. That way, he could escape from the constant fear of a sudden premature demise. But Jint had no such intention.

Compared to how he'd been aboard the *Gothelauth*, at least he wasn't presently worried about his future, and that was reassuring. Now he had no choice but to live as an **Abh noble**. He had no other

place he belonged.

As she drowsily nodded off, Ecryua too was reminiscing. She wasn't on duty yet, but her **access-cables** were connected to the **console**. Through her *froch*, she was sensing the scenery outside the ship.

Unlike most Abhs, Ecryua was not born in *Lacmhacarh*, but rather inside a trade ship. According to the records, she had been born while the ship was cruising through the **planar space** of the **Barkeh Monarchy**, but she naturally didn't have any memory of that, nor did she really care.

Her father could be considered an oddball even by Abh standards. Few people brought **artificial wombs** into trade ships with them. He was a capricious sort, and he doted on her when she was a tot. But he seemingly tired of raising her after five years, and he sent her (along with a cat) to their relatives' **orbital quarters** in *Lacmhacarh*. And so she spent her first five years aboard a trade ship. The number of people she'd met until then was limited. Her father and a number of cats had made up her entire world.

"**Navigator**," said the **Ship Commander**. "It's your shift now. Helm the ship."

Ecryua's consciousness was straddling the line between dream and reality.

"Did you hear me, Ecryua?" said Lafier, a trace of worry in her voice.

"Roger," Ecryua replied.

"If you're not feeling well, I don't mind piloting a little longer," she added. This time she didn't sound as worried as she did *expectant*.

"Not necessary." She equipped the **control gauntlet**. Her arm felt a bit heavy, but it was no big deal. "**Ship Commander**. Preparations for control transfer complete."

"Understood." Lafier's voice was slightly tinged with disappointment. "I leave it to you."

Keep up the good work, Your Highness.

She sensed what the ship was sensing through her *froch*. She could "see" the consort ships around them.

On occasion, the trade ship Ecryua had been on was near other ships. And on those occasions, her father would seat her in the Assistant Steerer's Seat so she could sense the space outside the ship.

She could swear she heard him say it like he was there with her: "This is a race, *Naurh*. And Daddy's gonna win."

The "race" was far from an edge-of-your-seat nail biter. The ships had all been more or less side-by-side. If a ship gained on any other or lost ground to any other, it was slowly and steadily — probably

because there was very little variance between their acceleration performances.

And this present moment was no different. In point of fact, she might even say this was even more boring than back then. The consort ships' acceleration performances were identical. Given that they were all the same model of ship, that made sense. As such, their positions relative to each other were totally fixed, as if some invisible rod had been run through them.

Until, suddenly, one of the ships began falling back. It was the *Crorcaubh*.

"*Crorcaubh*, what's wrong?" sounded the **Commandant's** voice.

"The output of Auxiliary Engine 2 is unstable," came the voice of a *Crorcaubh* **starpilot**.

"*Crorcaubh* **Ship Commander**," called Atosryua.

"Yes, ma'am. This is **Vice Hecto-Commander** *Baumderh*."

"Can you maintain the current power output?"

"We're not sure."

A pause. Silence.

"Okay, *Crorcaubh*. Fall back."

"But Commandant," said the *Crorcaubh* **Ship Commander**, "the ship is in tiptop shape otherwise. And the other auxiliary engines are in working order."

"That's not good enough. You understand, don't you?"

"...Understood. May victory be yours."

"Thanks, *Crorcaubh*. We'll catch you later."

Ecryua's spatio-sensory perception sensed the *Crorcaubh* falling back. Or perhaps "falling away" was more accurate. As they'd stopped accelerating, the ship was dropping drastically down. It was already far below the *Flicaubh*.

Whenever her father had won a race, he would sing a song, usually improvised. He'd sing songs he liked many times over as well, but those were also songs of his own invention.

Ecryua felt the urge to hum a tune, too, but she stopped at writing songs in her head. Her head composed a pretty good song, but she was well aware that others would be unable to comprehend it. Her father's songs were of ill repute even among their Ecryua Clan relatives. It appeared as though he and she alone were furnished with the musical sensibilities that made his songs sound euphonious. The only person left who could correctly appraise the songs of *Aicryac Üémh Tlyzr Naurh* was *Aicryac Üémh Tlyzr Naurh*.

Gnomboch was nervous. He would pilot not a smallcraft but a warship, albeit only temporarily. Of course, he had done so at the **starpilot academy**, and countless other times as a **trainee starpilot**.

But this was actual combat.

“**Messenger**, are you awake?” It was Yatesh’s voice.

He’d been waiting for the sweet sound of Yatesh’s voice. He would take the helm after Yatesh. “Yes, sir!” he replied right away.

“Can I trust you with the thing?” Yatesh sounded apprehensive.

“Yes, sir. I’ll be okay.”

“Don’t strain yourself, **Linewing**. Your job is to stay still. If you think up some independent navigation route, now’s not the time to test it out.”

“I know that, sir.”

“Good. Now do your best.”

“I will!” He had already prepared his **access-cables** and **control gauntlet** a good while ago. “I’m ready to go at any time. Please let me pilot.”

“I’ve already transferred control.”

“Ah... yes, sir.” *Gnomboch* felt the urge to move the fingers of his left hand, but if he did that, the ship would veer significantly from its course.

He sensed a swarm of ships far above them. It was the force of **patrol ships** at the lead. **Trample-Blitz Squadron 1** lacked firepower on its own, so a contingent of patrol ships had been added for this mission. Those patrol ships had had their **mines** removed, as they were unnecessary for this operation, but even so, they had more mass than raid ships, and as such were inferior with regard to acceleration. In addition, their construction made them frailer than raid ships, so they could not withstand the acceleration levels that Trample-Blitz Squadron 1 was putting out. That was why they had departed beforehand.

They had to get to their destination before it came time to carry out the mission. If they didn’t attack simultaneously, then the attack’s effectiveness would be halved.

Gnomboch took a deep breath. They had to sail all the way over there. And in order to do that, he wasn’t allowed to do a single thing.

So, I have to work not to work. At that thought, *Gnomboch* nearly busted out in laughter. Perhaps his spirit was more battered than even he had realized. The **Linewing** pulled himself together. “Auxiliary engines ceased. Detaching.”

“Roger,” replied Lafier.

The auxiliary engines, which had used up their fuel and propellant, were cut loose. But their role hadn’t come to an end just yet. In accordance with inertia, they thrust toward whichever low priority targets they could. They would most likely get intercepted on the way, but it couldn’t hurt to try. If they did reach their marks, even the light damage they would inflict was something. Among the staff

officers who formulated this strategy, there must be one or more who were both frugal and fond of giving the enemy a hard time.

The raid ships that detached their auxiliary engines continued accelerating at their base level of propulsive power. The artificial gravity reverted back to toward-the-floor mode, and the seats assumed their normal shapes.

Jint sighed audibly. As a **landworlder**, it must have had an effect on him.

“No abnormalities detected,” said Grinshia. While she was also a **landworlder**, she was quite composed.

“We’ll arrive at the firing point in thirty minutes’ time,” said Ecryua.

Everything was going as planned.

Lafier leaned back into her chair and focused on the information flowing into her brain through her *froch*. She gleaned how, at these speeds, the hydrogen atoms drifting through the vacuum of space pelted the hull much like a planet’s atmosphere would. She felt uneasy. Unlike their ancestors, who had to deal with timespans that shifted by whole years when accelerating or decelerating, Abhs of the present era tended to instantly flee to **planar space**. They could be called dissolute compared to their forebears, given how they rarely ever reached speeds like these. At the very least, this was a first for her.

She shook off her anxiety and addressed her crew. “This is your **Ship Commander**. Soon we will commence our hit-and-run attack on the enemy warship construction site. We won’t be going too fast on the retreat, so do not fret.”

“Firing point in E-minus twenty-five,” said Ecryua.

“Don’t concern yourself with enemy ships, Arbohf,” ordered Lafier.

“Roger.”

They knew that their movements were being picked up on from afar. The enemy was currently attempting to position themselves for the counterattack. But the allied ships were doing Trample-Blitz Squadron 1 a favor and keeping away from its course.

The patrol ship corps led the way, charging right in front as if they were outriders.

Farther in front lay the target, the enemy construction site. Naturally, it was not undefended. The site itself was equipped with defensive fire capabilities, the most menacing of which were the excessively powerful **laser cannons** that the PSSU had taken a liking to. They were even stronger than the main cannons of assault ships, and they wouldn’t stand a chance against a direct hit. Luckily, allies had put up a *sebyrec sera* (reflection cloud), which dispersed **laser**

beams. Reflection clouds needed to be rather thick to be of any use, so they didn't serve much of a purpose in fleet battles where friend and foe alike changed position incessantly. But here, where the target and course were fixed, they proved an effective tool.

Reflection clouds glittered in an alluring way. But they couldn't fend off every single laser beam. Even though the beams that made it through the reflective shard-fog were lower-intensity than before, they still posed a threat.

"Evasive tactics," ordered Atosryua.

"Arbohf," said Lafier, following those orders. "Switch to evasive tactics. Radius 500."

"Roger." So as not to change course, Arbohf fired the attitude control engines in short bursts.

"**Ship Commander**, multiple objects are flying at us! They appear to be enemy shells!" said Yatesh.

"*Gnomboch*," said Lafier. "I'm entrusting you with the mobile cannons again. Focus only on targets ahead. Don't track down what's already passed us by."

"Roger that, ma'am." *Gnomboch* jumped for the control console.

"Commencing fire in ten minutes," reported Ecryua.

One of the patrol ships in front turned into a ball of flame. Even as it scattered into discrete pieces, a clump of plasma whooshed not far past their rear. Its mobile cannons spewed out a ray system as they exploded. The enemy shells burst, and everlasting darkness followed.

"Commencing fire in five."

"No damage as of now," said Grinshia.

The patrol ship corps steadily drew closer. As soon as they lined up with the patrol ships, they would all start firing. They had to hold out until that time.

"Now in contact with the **reflection cloud**," stated Ecryua.

The reflection cloud's friction heated up the hull. Once they cleared away from the cloud, their only defense against lasers would be to avoid them. And the closer they got, the more difficult that would become.

The enemy shells flew close by — too close for comfort. But since the ship was going so fast, there was no way the shells would turn around and give chase.

"**Messenger**," said Arbohf, "I leave the enemy shells to you. Prioritize the ones that look like they're gonna hit us. I'm gonna have my hands full dancing wild and crazy."

"Yes, sir. I'll try," replied a not so confident *Gnomboch*.

"You need to say that with more confidence," said Yatesh. "After all, if you fail, we'll all be dead."

"Yes, sir." But *Gnomboch* couldn't hide his nervous tension.

Lafier opened her mouth to chide him, but she changed her mind. This was not the time, and besides, this would be a good experience for *Gnomboch*. When Lafier had been a **linewing**, she had been under even more pressure.

The ship fired the attitude control engines with nary a pause. Lafier's palms were damp with sweat. The shadowy figure of the enemy construction site was looming larger in her *frocragh*, and the ship had approached within reach of the sterns of the patrol ships.

"Firing point in one minute," said Ecryua.

"Can you hear me, everybody?" Atosryua appeared on the screen. "One ship's down, but our orders stand. In about a minute, we'll commence the attack. We'll start counting down from the thirty-second mark, so start firing in tandem with the countdown."

"You heard her, I trust," said Lafier, who'd stood up and turned to address her crew. "All hands, prepare for **EM cannon** fusillade!"

The **alarm** went off.

"Arbohf, you devote yourself to steering. *Gnomboch*, you prepare to open fire," ordered Lafier.

"Roger!" replied the **Linewing** shrilly. "Ammo has been loaded. Safeties off. Prepared to open fire."

"Onboard weapons all in working order," said Grinshia.

"Onboard environment all okay. None unable to fight," reported Jint.

"Thirty seconds to commence fire. Twenty-nine, twenty-eight, twenty-seven..." came the voice of a **starpilot** with **squadron command**.

"Arbohf, do you have it in your sights?" asked Lafier.

"The target's so big, it'd be harder to miss, ma'am. This is in the bag. They'll be eating our fire, no problem."

Ship construction sites were gargantuan. Dozens of smaller manufacture-tubes were linked to the winding stretch of machinery that was the main manufacture-tube. The factories were spherical in shape, and situated in rows.

The *Flicaubh*'s designated target was the factory-sphere thought to be producing antimatter fuel tanks. That sphere alone was 2,700 *üésdagh* in diameter.

At last, they had lined up with the arrayed patrol ships. That very instant, Atosryua's command: "Commence fire!"

"Fire!" ordered Lafier.

The **EM cannons** at the *Flicaubh*'s bow roared in unison. No sooner than an **EM cannon** was loaded was the **fusion shell** fired. The fusion shells shot by both **Trample-Blitz Squadron** and the patrol ship corps that was working in concert with it were streaking toward the enemy construction site at relativistic speeds. The construction site

was firing **lasers** blindly, but the defensive spray was futile. The site soaked up nearly every single one of the **fusion shells**. Not even a structure that enormous could stand after such devastation. Unable to withstand the explosions ripping inside the structure thought to be the antimatter fuel tank factory, the sphere burst in an unsightly manner and fell off the main manufacture-tube. Almost definitely no longer a functioning factory, it now resembled an overripe pomegranate. And the people who'd been inside were likely all dead as well.

The other sections of the construction site met similar fates. The tragic structure was now a tortured husk, mutilated and blown to pieces.

"Bombardment complete," announced Atosryua. "All ships, shift to evacuation procedures."

The *Flicaubh* charged through the area of space, which was now the current home of drifting masses too huge to call "shards." Through a steering error, one of the patrol ships bumped into one of them. *That's the one way I'd hate to die*, thought Lafier. *Of course, everyone else is thinking the same thing.*

Arbohf was sweating. The mood in the air wasn't amenable to raising one's voice, even if to ease the tension. They'd cleared the death zone in less than a minute, but they couldn't relax just yet. The construction site attack corps planned to make use of the planet Akadd's gravity to put on the brakes. Orbiting Akadd were arsenals and factories of all kinds, as well as fortifications of various sizes. They would have to hold out against an Akadd welcome.

Lafier checked the tide-of-war diagram. The formation of the construction site attack corps was in disarray. While they would have liked to form neat columns, the situation wouldn't allow for that. There were consort ships all around, but until they assembled via gravity-braking, the *Flicaubh* would have to act independently.

All fired up, she strained her *frocragh*. Inputting diverse variables into the fourth-dimensional space her mind was picturing, she searched for the optimal course. If they got too far from the planet, then the gravity well wouldn't work its magic. If they drew too close to the planet, its dense atmosphere would burn them up. She had to ascertain a course that was the perfect medium, and she had to do it in a hurry. When she finished computing the course: "Arbohf, fire two volleys at Enemy Stronghold 101."

"Roger that. Firing."

101 was the identification number applied by the **Star Forces**. The enemy called it by a different name, but Lafier didn't know what that name was, nor did she care to know. In any case, two fusillades were fired at the stronghold. This was purely to contain the enemy.

Without asking whether the volleys hit their mark, Lafier laid

down her next command and sent Arbohfh on the course she'd determined. "Begin full-power deceleration."

"Roger!"

The *Flicaubh* about-faced and began decelerating at full power. Thus would they charge toward the planet Akadd. They would pass under the assemblage of orbital strongholds. This rankled her somewhat, but there was nothing else to be done.

As it happened, Enemy Stronghold 101 was unscathed, but it seemed as though that fort couldn't afford to worry about a ship zooming past them and out of their sights.

Many **ship captains** besides Lafier had come up with the same tactic after getting showered in dozens of **fusion shells**.

"**Information link** interrupted," reported Yatesh. It was a phenomenon that wasn't uncommon when surrounded by ionized air.

"No matter," stated Lafier out loud, since *Gnomboch* had an uneasy look on his face. "It's only temporary, and right now, I am the one commanding," she said, to reassure him. "It has happened before."

As the *Flicaubh* decelerated, it flew through Akadd's gravitational field. Now they were no longer in danger of getting attacked by the enemy.

"Communications back online," said Yatesh.

Lafier searched for the **flagship** through her *frocragh*, but she couldn't find it. She figured it must be outside her spatio-sensory range.

"How much time lag?"

"10.1 seconds."

They were farther from the flagship than she'd imagined.

"All ships, assemble by the **flagship**," came Atosryua's voice.

"All hands are relieved from their shifts," said Lafier. "The crew is to take breaks in sequential order. Good work, Arbohfh."

"Thank you, ma'am." Though he looked like the dictionary image of "total exhaustion," his voice was tinged with his usual pluck.

"You are to rest for eight hours' time. I shall steer the ship."

"Yes, ma'am. Allow me to take you up on your offer." Arbohfh saluted.

"Everyone else is to rest as well. Except for Yatesh. You will work more hours, alongside me."

"It's an honor," smiled Yatesh, saluting, though the smile seemed a bit hollow.

After the eight hours elapsed, Lafier gave the **Ship Captain's Seat** to Ecryua before retiring to the ship captain's room.

The ships of **Trample-Blitz Squadron 1** had assumed a file formation and were following the return route while decelerating. It

was a far more peaceful journey than getting there had been, and it would be a long one, too.

Shortly after entering her quarters, she flopped onto her bed, loath to so much as take off her **uniform** beforehand. She fell fast asleep, but her slumber was soon disturbed, as her **wristgear** (which she had placed beside her bed) was beeping. She pulled it toward her. "What?"

"Ship Commander." It was Ecryua. "It's Commandant Atosryua."

"Does she want me?"

"She wants all crewmembers. In ten minutes."

Lafier interpreted this statement as *Commandant Atosryua will, in ten minutes, address the **soldiers** of the squadron.* "Understood. I'll go to the **bridge** right away. You had best wake up the off-duty crew."

"Do we assemble?"

"No, no need. Just have them listen wherever they are."

"Roger."

Lafier put on her **uniform** and hurried over to the bridge. She hadn't reached it before the **alarm** sounded. This could only be Ecryua's doing. An effective wake-up call, but overkill nonetheless.

Upon arriving at the bridge, she slipped into the ship captain's room to stop the **alarm**. "This is your **Ship Commander**," she announced over the comms. "The **Squadron Commandant** will be speaking to you shortly. Listen closely to her words. I hereby allow those on-duty to take a break. Those without urgent tasks to attend to ought to rest for now. Those who are off duty, remain on standby. That is all."

Ecryua and Arbohf were the only ones at the bridge, but the other **starpilots** soon arrived. Before long, Atosryua appeared on the main screen.

"Attention, all squadron crewmembers, this is the Commandant of **Trample-Blitz Squadron 1**. Allow me to thank you for your hard work. You did a great job out there. The squadron carried out the mission without losing a single ship. This is at once a miracle, and the result of your daily efforts. Now, as you're all aware, the squadron is presently traveling a course for the planet Menderess. The original plan was to, after some breaktime, start a fresh new mission."

Atosryua paused. "And yet, I have some news to share. We have orders to return. Our plans have changed, as we are now to head toward the Kemar Portal. We'll be joining with the *Crorcaubh* on the way, and after resupplying, we'll return to the **capital**. Make the necessary preparations without delay. Let me tell you, I haven't been to *Lacmhacarh* in ages, so if you dawdle, I *will* leave you behind. That is all."

The personnel on the bridge saluted the screen. Atosryua returned the salute, and the video went out.

The address now over, Arbohf said “Is it only our squadron?”

“It can’t be,” said Yatesh. “They must be switching out the whole **sub-fleet**. We did do some good work.”

“But the main force of the sub-fleet is way behind us,” Arbohf murmured.

He had every right to be bewildered. Despite the gravity-braking, the speed of the construction site attack corps was still high. The allied ships would never catch up at this rate. The main force of the **assault sub-fleet Bosurec** comprised four **assault squadrons**, and while they had broken away from the field of battle, they had stuck around near the front lines. In addition, there was the matter of repairs to consider. Although **Trample-Blitz Squadron 1** hadn’t taken much damage to speak of, there had to be some injured people aboard the assault ships. If it was the whole assault sub-fleet that was being ordered to return, then it would take a significant amount of time.

On the other hand, Yatesh also had a point. There was no reason to extract the Trample-Blitz Squadron alone from the Sub-Fleet. Perhaps in the past, it was conceivable they might order the raid ships to return in order to obtain information regarding their operation and steering, but they must have already gathered enough of that kind of data by now.

Lafier’s **wristgear** beeped. “It seems our **Gunner** was correct.”

A more detailed navigation schedule had now been sent.

According to it, **Trample-Blitz Squadron 1** was to detach from the **Assault Sub-Fleet Bosurec** and return to the **capital** alone. The return route was defended by **Twin Thorns Fleet 25**, so there was no cause for concern on that front. Truth be told, the other squadrons would certainly envy them. But the question remained — why, at this stage, were they being told to head back? It wasn’t as though the enemy had been expelled from this star system or destroyed. Though they were about to lose the Kemar Portal, the system’s inner planets and Kemar’s star, and the planet Akadd (which was what made this system the core of the PSSU’s munitions production), there was no way they were going to surrender without a fight. Their main forces had made a getaway to the outer planets, and they were evidently preparing for a decisive battle. Granted, if they blew up the group of factories in the Akadd area, the enemy’s war potential would drop to the point where this could be safely ignored. Yet as a rule, the Abh loved tenaciously hounding the enemy, and it appeared Command was overflowing with the sentiment that they ought to engage with the enemy to the last. In fact, the next operation, the search-and-destroy sweeping mission, was already in the works. Trample-Blitz Squadron 1 had been about to begin preparing for that mission, once this operation was over. Their orders to return had truly come out of the blue.

The thought occurred to some that maybe they were going to be put on a mission to escort an unladen supply corps back to the capital, but that too seemed not to be the case. They were to head back in single-ship **space-time bubbles** — which was to say, as fast as possible.

“Grinshia,” said Lafier, “we’re supposed to enter **planar space** posthaste. Can you ready the ship?”

“Of course, ma’am. The ship is undamaged, so there won’t be a problem.” The **Inspector Supervisor**’s voice was slightly stuffy.

Lafier wondered whether to apologize, but she realized that would only hurt her feelings, so she replied with a simple “I see.”

“As for fuel resupply, what sort of protocol should we follow?” asked Grinshia.

“We’re scheduled to encounter a fuel resupply planet in thirty-seven hours. In forty-two hours, we’ll encounter a **supply ship** to receive non-fuel supplies.”

“Understood, ma’am.” Grinshia quickly set about preparing for resupply through her console.

“**Ship Commander**,” said Jint. “What will become of the sick and wounded?”

Though he said “the sick and wounded,” that term included those who were neither — which, in actuality, comprised the vast majority of the crew. What was most often damaged in interstellar warfare was not the body, but the mind. The field of battle and all that related to it tended to warp people’s souls and psyches, but even putting that aside, the sea of the stars was an alien environment to Landers in particular. To them, people who could spend extended periods of time in space were the abnormal ones. If the galaxy wasn’t at war, the military would have had the luxury of choosing only the boldest men and women, as determined by a rigorous psychological examination. One example of just such a person was Grinshia herself; she had been serving for a long time. But there was a war on, and so they couldn’t afford to be so choosy when selecting applicants. Consequently, the numbers of **NCCs** with nervous disorders increased. If the symptoms were light enough, that fact proved no impediment to sailing as normal. But as the **Star Forces** learned through centuries of experiences, humans would repeat the same unthinkable mistakes over and over again, and that knowledge was reflected in the design philosophy of the ships. But sometimes, during the extreme stress situation known as battle, the behavior of those suffering from mental illness would put the ship in danger.

This operation in particular was expected to be too much to handle for **NCCs** without much experience. Those **NCCs** with less than three years’ experience in the fleet had been given a psych exam, and

those found to have issues had been granted a break. Though of course, they had no place to spend that “break” besides a medic ship.

The decrease in **NCC** numbers brought with it a decrease in survival rates, but it would be an even dicier prospect keeping them aboard. Or so Squadron Command had deemed. For this operation, if they ever took damage, that damage would not be the survivable kind that could use NCCs around for repairs, anyway. In other words, they would either emerge unscathed, or burst like balloons, with no in-between. That was one of the reasons behind Command’s rationale.

There were also those who *were* sick or injured. However, those who were gravely injured enough to need submersion in tissue regeneration liquid and those too ill to get out of bed had already been taken far away on medic ships. The people aboard the medic ships orbiting Kemar were those who would heal with some rest, and they were to participate in the operation to come. To them, leaving the hospital was nothing if not good news. The entertainment planetoids near the **capital** made for far better convalescence than a medic ship.

“We will encounter the medic ship they’re aboard in fifty-five hours,” replied Lafier, looking at the route map.

“**Ship Commander**, I would like to begin preparing to accommodate the sick and wounded now while I have the chance. May I be granted permission to do so?”

“Of course,” she said, despite thinking he was being quite hasty.

“In that case, I’ll take my leave.” Jint saluted and left the bridge.

I suppose I shall take a breather, too, thought Lafier. She ordered the crew to return to their duties, and entrusted the rest to Ecryua once again.

Chapter 9: The *Gych Mairaler* (Snows of My'ral)

The My'ral Star System. A remote frontier system in the United Humankind. Just beyond it lay Hania Federation territory; Greater Alkont Republic territory was also nearby. As one might expect, this star system was once a great hub for foreign trade. Commodities and goods were taken here from various UH star systems and accumulated for transport to Hania and Alkont.

Naturally, a large number of ships from both nations were docked there. In order to sell off the extensive cargo, the UH had constructed an artificial planetoid. Since the start of the war, the star system had gotten more and more active. Compared to peacetime trade, the goods “smelled of war,” so to speak, but the amount that needed management and handling had only increased. More goods than the artificial planetoid could totally process were flowing both in and out. It was the heart of the rapid stream of supplies and materials.

It was mainly weapons given as aid by the UH to the Greater Alkont Republic that passed through the My'ral Star System. After Operation Twin Thorns began, that flow became reversed. In order to support the ships that had been cut loose from the core of the UH, cargo had been sent from Alkont. That being said, Alkont had to sustain its own military as well, and so the volume of goods being transported had dropped sharply. And at present, even that much had come to an end.

The vanguard of the **Star Forces** had passed through the *Saudec Mairaler* (My'ral Portal) and gained control over the star system. The manmade planet that was the symbol of the systems' prosperity was now a pitiful shell of its former self, though that was not the work of the **Star Forces**. The UH government officials who had managed the place had decided to destroy it so as to prevent the enemy from making use of it. However, their concerns had been groundless. The **Star Forces** were particular about how they waged war, and the thought never crossed their minds to incorporate something the enemy created into their own supply train.

Even without the manmade planet, the My'ral System was serving its role as a **Star Forces** supply base to perfection. It was flourishing and bustling enough to give the **capital** a run for its money. The people of the My'ral System had likely never seen this many

interstellar ships within its borders in all its history.

“Little wonder the **Portal**’s so crowded!” said the **Ship Commander** of the **battle-line ship** *Caïsaumh* with admiration.

The **strike sub-fleet** *Gudersec* (to which the *Caïsaumh* belonged) had been made to wait for three days, and had finally been permitted to enter the My’ral Portal. It was then they learned that the star system was hosting a gathering of large fleets.

“**Information link** complete,” reported *Bhonh*.

“Excellent, thanks,” said Behrsoht before asking (as he’d been dying to), “Now, do you know what this is all about?”

“It’s not just **Twin Thorns Fleet 13** that has been gathered here,” replied *Bhonh*. “Almost the entireties of Fleets 11, 12, and 14 have also been amassed.”

“Well, I didn’t think it’d just be our fleet here, but Fleet 14, too...” Behrsoht looked overcome with surprise. “Are our flanks okay?”

Byrec Logona Borperr (Twin Thorns Fleet 14) was supposed to be their defense against the Greater Alkont Republic. Knowing that even that fleet was here, he felt uneasy, like their flanks were vulnerable.

“Well, it’s not something for us to worry about,” said *Bhonh*, as consolation. “Fleet Command must have something in mind.”

“The least you could do is let me openly worry,” he sulked. “I don’t want to get attacked without knowing what’s going on.”

“All right then, sir, please worry to your heart’s content. Incidentally, it seems the name of the fleet will change.”

“A name change?” he said, taken aback. “What’s the new name?”

“We don’t know yet.”

“And here I’d taken a liking to the name **twin thorns**.”

“We’ll be under that name for a few more days, so please, enjoy it while you can.”

“Enjoy a name?”

“Don’t ask me, sir,” she said, tilting her head.

“That aside, if our name is changing, then our mission is, too.”

“Yes, sir, most likely.”

“Do you know anything about our new mission?”

Bhonh worked the controls and wordlessly showed the Ship Commander her screen, upon which blinked the word “CLASSIFIED.”

Behrsoht shot a meaningful glance Duhier’s way. “Hey, out with it already. What was that business with the **Commander-in-Chief**, *Fiac Lartsor*?”

“I can’t say yet, sir,” replied Duhier. “I would be breaching military regulations.”

“I figured as much,” he shrugged his shoulders forlornly. “But it’s not just military regulations, is it? I bet your responsibilities as an **Imperial** is one of the reasons your lips are zipped.”

Duhier couldn't answer that directly. "My apologies, sir."

"Again, don't apologize."

"Okay, sir."

"I guess I have some idea what it was about, anyway."

"Are you thinking it's Alkont, sir?" asked *Cazzubh*.

"That's one possibility."

"There are other possibilities, sir?"

"Of course there are."

"I don't believe it, sir! The **Empire** never cooks up wars itself."

"This is the war to end all wars. These things happen."

"This isn't the final war, sir."

"If my thinking isn't wrong, this *will* be humanity's final war."

"Do you really think so, sir?"

"Well, yes, I suppose I do." Behrsoht looked at Duhier again. "But enough of this speculation. Not in front of the guy who knows the answer. He won't even tell us if we're on the money."

"It pains me, too," Duhier blurted out. And it was the truth.

"Oh, I get you. I get you, **Linewing** Abliar. How about you mutter the answer to yourself under your breath?"

"I don't have a habit of talking to myself, sir," Duhier answered earnestly.

"That's bad for your mental health. Why don't you just scribble out the fleet's new name, at the very least?"

"I don't have a habit of scribbling, either. Also, I honestly don't know what the new name will be."

"But a person from the **Imperial Household** needs to be used to it," said *Bhonh*.

"Used to what?"

"To keeping secrets, sir."

"What, that? All **soldiers** understand that as a matter of course. Nobody's out there flapping their gums about classified material, no matter their position."

Bhonh gave her superior officer a skeptical look.

"What's with those eyes?"

"By the way, **Ship Commander**," said *Bhonh*, changing the subject, "it seems we'll be given a seventy-two-hour break."

"You should lead with important info like that. Where?"

"Where, sir? The **mobile canteen**," she said, astonished he'd ask.

"Lame."

"What were you expecting, sir? This is a battlefield."

"Oh c'mon, soldiers fighting the last war there'll ever be deserve worthier entertainment. You agree, don't you, **Linewing** Abliar?"

"I suppose, if the soldiers are indeed fighting the final war," Duhier replied casually.

“Dammit, couldn’t get you to spill,” said Behrsoht. He looked frustrated.

“Was that question designed to do so?”

“That it was, sir prince. Well, guess that’s an Abliar for you.”

“Oh.” Duhier was perplexed.

Behrsoht changed the subject. “The mobile canteen’s bound to be super crowded, too.”

“Shall we make a reservation?” said *Bhonh*.

“You’ve a good head on those shoulders.”

“Where shall we make the reservation?”

“Snag us the best room possible. If there’s a gambling house nearby, all the better.”

They’re mixing work and pleasure, Duhier thought, upon seeing *Bhonh* actually set about making the reservation. That aspect also stuck in his craw.

“Reservation made, sir. The place is named ‘The Swallow.’” *Bhonh* threw him the **memchip**.

Behrsoht caught it. “What a stupid name.”

“Then please, do it yourself,” she replied, clearly wounded. “But it’s a minute’s walk away from the gambling house.”

“Good job. I’ll just put up with the name. By the way, when does our time off begin? Don’t tell me it already has.”

“If I tell you it already has, what will you do, sir?”

“Mutiny,” he replied immediately.

“I won’t be a party to your mutiny, sir.”

“I don’t expect anything of you.” Behrsoht patted Duhier on the shoulder. “We’ve got a **royal prince**.”

“Will you take him hostage, sir?” asked *Cazzubh*. He shrugged. “I don’t think that’s a very good idea, **Ship Commander**.”

“I don’t either. I’d hate to be hauled off to the Hell. I’ll turn to him as our leader.”

This startled Duhier. *He doesn’t know the contents of the Fleet Commander-in-Chief’s secret orders, does he?* Of course, thinking it through more coolheadedly, he knew that was scarcely possible.

“That sounds like fun,” said *Bhonh*. “Unfortunately, though, our break time begins when we dock at the canteen.”

“What’s unfortunate about that? That’s fine by me.”

“What indeed?” sang the **Senior Communications Officer**.

“Well, whatever. When are we arriving at the canteen?”

“In twenty-two hours.”

“I see. **Linewing** Abliar, go spread the joyous news to the crew.” Duhier did just that.

Twenty-four hours later, Duhier was there at the mobile canteen,

which was named the *Dauc Slycr*. As construction had begun a mere week ago, there were many as yet unfinished sections. Unlike his **Ship Commander**, Duhier hadn't made any reservations, opting instead to stroll aimlessly around.

He found where The Swallow lay, and walked in a direction leading expressly away from it. Just as Behrsoht had predicted, the canteen town was jammed with **soldiers**. The *Dauc Slycr* was small, given the sheer number of warships to accommodate. Passing through one of the brand-new avenues, he stumbled on an area that looked timeworn and old. They'd probably linked up a portion of a canteen town that had outlived its usefulness. That was where Duhier encountered a cafe by the name of The Cat's Cradle, which he proceeded to enter. He ordered some hot **peach juice** and had them add a few drops of white spirits. He was on break; he could indulge a little.

The cafe was moderately crowded, but there wasn't a single familiar face among the customers. Yet they knew who Duhier was. He was an **Imperial**, and the **Empress's** grandson at that. Not one of the soldiers was ill-mannered enough to call out to him.

Duhier felt relaxed for the first time in a while, but that didn't last for long.

"Mind if I sit here?" *Bhonh* had a hand on the seat in front.

"No, of course not," he said, smiling in resignation.

"You don't seem very pleased."

"No, I'm just surprised. Do you not have any plans of your own, **Senior Communications Officer**?"

"Plans? Not with how sudden this furlough was," she laughed lightly, before ordering some **coffee**.

"I suppose," said Duhier, as conversation filler. He didn't know what to talk about. He decided to wait for her to bring something up, seeing as she must have started this conversation for a reason.

The coffee arrived. "I'll be out of your hair in no time, so let's chat for the time being."

"Yes," he replied meekly.

"You're not terribly sociable."

"I'm an Abliar."

"Makes sense." She sipped her coffee.

Duhier drank of his peach juice.

"**Linewing**," she said, finally getting to the heart of the matter.

"What is it?"

"You're not fitting in, aboard the ship."

"So it seems," he nodded. There wasn't a moment he hadn't felt that way.

"That's not a good thing."

"It's not." Duhier braced himself for a lecture.

"But it's not a bad thing, either."

"It isn't?" Duhier wasn't expecting that.

"It isn't. There are **starpilots** who adapt to military life from the outset, that much is true. But I'd say the vast majority don't. You're in that majority. That's all I want to say. It's neither a good nor a bad thing."

"Which type were you, **Vanguard**?"

"I'm in the minority. I was raised on a battleship. A **battle-line ship** named the *Taircéth*. I was aboard the *Taircéth* since the age of three, and the **starpilots**, **NCCs** and company doted on me. Which is why, when I graduated from **academy** and boarded a warship, it felt like coming home."

"But ma'am," said Duhier, "I recall you saying you didn't like a starpilot's life."

"I don't. A warship is my old home. But just because it's my old home doesn't mean I necessarily like it. I think there are plenty of other potential livelihoods more enjoyable than being a **soldier**, though maybe they're not what they're cracked up to be. The point is, I'd be a beginner at any other way of life. I'm not confident I could ever get used to anything besides being a **starpilot**."

"I see."

"So you don't need to try too hard to 'fit in,' **Linewing**."

"Is that how I appear? I'm 'trying too hard'?"

"No, it's not." She rested her chin on her hands. "When people feel like they don't fit in, normally they either try to blend in somehow, or turn their backs completely. You're just *detached*."

"I don't mean to come across that way."

"I understand that. I'm sure you were just conducting yourself as you deemed reasonable. That's what being detached is."

So that's how others see me, is it? This was news to him.

"Okay, so, what I want to say is that while I don't mind if you stay that way, there's something I'd like you to keep in mind."

"What is it?"

"Don't look down on it."

"On what?" Duhier tilted his head in puzzlement.

"On the small little microcosm you currently belong to. The mood on the *Caïsaumh* isn't the greatest. It's so-so. I've served on a few different ships, so take it from me. And there must be a lot of things that can bug you. I don't blame you if you don't like the feel of the community aboard the *Caïsaumh*. That's your right. Just don't regard it with *contempt*."

Duhier fixed his gaze straight into *Bhonh*'s tawny brown eyes. "I'll do my best not to."

“This isn’t some kind of goalpost for you to *try* for,” she said, her tone turning severe. “These are orders from your superior officer.”

Duhier grew increasingly bewildered. When it came to his outer demeanor, he could always do as ordered. But how was he expected to manage his inner emotions?

“I’ll do my best. That’s all I can tell you.”

“You’re an Abliar and can tell no lies, eh? Just tell me one thing.”

“Yes.”

“Do you already hold us in contempt?”

“No, not at all,” Duhier replied.

“That so. I’m relieved.”

“Please let me ask a question of my own.”

“By all means.”

“Have you ever looked down on a ship’s crew, **Vanguard**?”

“Have you ever questioned whether the **Empire** should be respected or disdained?” she asked in reply.

“No, ma’am. There’s no need to entertain such a question.”

“To me, a warship and the **Empire** are the same. My true home was the *Taircéth*, but that ship no longer exists. Now, all warships are a home to return to for me. The Empire that *I* know, I know solely through its warships. In my eyes, to scorn a warship’s community is to scorn the Empire.”

“I understand.”

“And yet you still can’t promise me anything other than that you’ll try, correct?” she asked, with impish eyes.

“That is correct,” Duhier nodded.

“Thought so.”

Suddenly, a female voice spilled through the loudhailers: “Attention! Attention! This is the Command Center of the newly formed fleet. We have special news, so please listen wherever you may be. This news is for the **soldiers** of Twin Thorns Fleets 11, 12, 13, and 14.”

Duhier was listening carefully. *Bhonh* and the other customers had stopped chatting and had pricked up their ears.

“Moments ago, the name of the operation we will be carrying out was decided,” resounded the female voice. “The name of the operation is *Gycnerh* (Snow Crystal). I repeat. The name of the operation is **Snow Crystal**. In accordance with **Empire** custom, our fleet will also heretofore be named the *Byrec Gycnerr*. The **Fleet Commander-in-Chief** is Former *Roiglaharérh Byrer Borperr* (Twin Thorns Fleet Vice Commander-in-Chief) cum *Glaharérh Byrer Lobina Borperr* (Twin Thorns Fleet 13 Commander-in-Chief), **Imperial Admiral** Cohtponee. As for the command center, the command center of Twin Thorns Fleet 13 will take it over; consider this a lateral move. The details of the

mission and the order of battle will be made known to you later on. That is all from Snow Crystal Command.”

“The **Snow Crystal Fleet...**” *Bhonh* shook her head. “The **Ship Commander’s** going to hate that name.”

Chapter 10: The *Goc Crima* (Screech of Space-Time)

“**Ship Commander**, the *Lartbéic Barcoær* (Barkeh Royal Palace) has granted permission to pass through the **Portal**,” said Yatesh. “We are permitted to enter at 11:06:32 by ship’s time.”

“Understood. **Navigator**, do calculate the route,” ordered Lafier.

“Calculating route... Calculated,” said Ecryua.

In the vicinity of the *Saudec Barcoær* (Barkeh Portal) drifted innumerable **space-time bubbles**. The massed ships were waiting in line for their turn to enter *Lacmhacarh*. Needless to say, there were also many space-time bubbles emerging *from* the **capital**.

That business was a telltale sign the Empire was at war. Of course, this was the capital of a giant empire, so it was bustling even in peacetime, but it was during times of war that *Lacmhacarh* truly went into full swing.

The **raid ship** *Flicaubh* soared along the route that Ecryua calculated, drawing ever closer to the Barkeh Portal. “**Portal** in E minus three minutes,” said Ecryua.

“Begin the countdown at the thirty-second mark,” said Lafier.

The time had come. “...Four, three, two, one, passing through the Portal.”

The sparkling **capital** sprawled before them in all its glory.

“Initiate the information link with the **squadron flagship**,” ordered Lafier.

“Roger,” said Yatesh. “Conducting information link. Information link complete.”

Atosryua’s face appeared on screen. “Welcome, *Flicaubh*. You’re the last ones here. Also, sorry about this, but we’ll be taking control of steering.”

Robbed of anything to do, Arbohf simply shrugged.

The mood in the air on the **bridge** was relaxed. They would be remote-controlled by the squadron flagship, the *Chtucaubh*, for a brief spell. As a result, the bridge personnel had nothing to work on.

“This is your **Ship Commander**,” Lafier announced over the comms. “All-hands-on-duty status has ended. All off-duty crew, at ease.”

Trample-Blitz Squadron 1 formed a column and flew deeper into the **capital**, headed toward Special Construction Site 7022. This was

where each of the ships would get their damaged parts repaired.

"It was you who was supposed to be on duty right now, right, Yatesh?" asked Lafier.

"Yes, ma'am. Allow me to take control of the **bridge**, if you please."

"Please do." Lafier got up from her seat.

"I'm looking forward to it," broached Jint.

"Looking forward to what?" asked Lafier, curious.

"The banquet."

"We had plans for a banquet? This is the first I'm hearing of this."

"Commandant Atosryua promised, remember? She said she'd hold a banquet at the expense of the **Baronic House of Febdash**."

"Ah, that," said Lafier. Then she remembered the banquet hosted by the Count's House of Hyde. She could hear the sordid and disorderly din even now. She wrinkled her brows and frowned. "You're looking forward to *that*?"

"Well, that banquet was a bit much, granted..." Jint glanced meaningfully at Ecryua's face.

"What is it?" Lafier looked at Ecryua's face as well.

"It was fun," Ecryua whispered.

"What was?" Lafier still didn't understand.

"The Stylet."

Lafier was still not getting it.

"I get what she's trying to say," said Jint. "It seems that before **Trample-Blitz Squadron 1** could do anything, Commandant Atosryua hosted a get-together. As **Deca-Commander** Ecryua tells it, it was a real hoot."

"I see." The Stylet *was* one of the most famed restaurants that catered to the Star Forces. Lafier, too, was aware of how delicious the food there was said to be. "But it's not set in stone that the banquet will be taking place there."

"Guess you're right; I haven't heard specifics." Jint put his hands behind his head. "Come to think of it, it'd be nice if it were held at the *Garich Arocr Lymr Faibdacr* (Febdash Baroness's Capital Manor)."

"Either way, I'm not particularly looking forward to it."

"Well, you were raised at the **Imperial Palace**, so that makes sense," said Jint. "Banquets can't have been all that rare for you."

"That's not true," said Lafier. "Well, yes, the banquets are rather frequent, but we can't exactly let loose. It's us **Imperials** who do the inviting, after all."

"Then why not be the guest instead of the host for once?"

"But I'd rather be flying a ship than attending a party."

Jint was astonished. "Haven't you had your fill of flying ships already?"

“We haven’t been flying ships,” said Lafier.

“What she said,” said Ecryua.

“Oh, I get it. You mean flying ships by hand.” Jint looked at their left hands. “What I don’t really get is, is it really that fun?”

“We don’t do it because it’s ‘fun,’” said Lafier. “We do it because to us, flying at high speeds feels natural.”

“To me it is fun,” said Ecryua. “I’m not fussed about whether it’s ‘natural.’”

“Is it sort of like how if a guy doesn’t take a bath, they feel gross?” said Jint.

“It’s nothing like that,” said Lafier. “And I’ll have you know we take baths, too.”

“I know that...”

“Do you take baths because it comes naturally? No, you take baths in order to be clean.”

“That may be,” said Jint, pondering, “but if you ask me, it’s more for-the-moment than that. It just feels good to come out refreshed, you know? People don’t really take baths just to be hygienic. They can be plenty clean already and still feel gross if they don’t bathe daily. On that point, I thought I’d fully turned Abh.”

“What do you mean?” asked Lafier, curious.

“I told you how I learned how to ‘be an Abh’ at a school on Delktu, right? They drilled it into our heads that since Abhs are obsessed with bathing every day, those who are seriously aiming to be **imperial citizens** should make it a habit to bathe before going to bed.”

“Imperial citizens?” asked Ecryua. Going by her tone, this had struck her as odd.

“There’s not a whole ton of Landers who can go straight to being Abhs like I did, so there ain’t any schools for that. Going to a school for imperial citizens was my only option, man.”

“I’m your superior,” said Ecryua.

“Pardon my language, **Deca-Commander**,” said Jint. *Now I see how our ways of thinking differ. Lafier also enjoys bathing, of course, but to her, the fact that it feels good or that it puts her heart at ease is secondary.*

But Jint may have had a point. Just as bathing was both a momentary pleasure and a necessity in order to keep clean, soaring between the stars was, to the Abh, both a momentary pleasure and a ritual whereby Abhs affirmed to themselves that they were, in fact, Abhs.

“Either way,” said Jint, “that flying business has nothing to do with me. All I’m looking forward to is the banquet.”

Atosryua reappeared on screen. “I hate to put a damper on your

excitement, but it seems you're wanted at the **Imperial Palace** posthaste, **Quartermaster Vanguard**."

"Me, ma'am?" said Jint, looking distinctly mystified. "I'm to go to the **Imperial Palace**, and not the **Ship Commander**?"

"Those are our orders. Oh yeah, by the by, it's just as you suspected — we just landed a reservation at The Stylet. The banquet will start in thirty-two hours."

Lafier wondered how much of the conversation the Commandant had listened in on.

"How long will it take? Will I not be able to make it in time?" he asked, in self-pity.

"No idea," said Atosryua bluntly. "I don't know what this meeting's about, after all."

"Speaking of which, with whom will I be meeting?"

"I don't know that, either."

"Don't tell me... is it **Her Majesty** I'm..."

"Certainly not. If it was an audience with **Her Majesty**, you'd need to go through more complex procedures. Isn't that right, **Vice Hecto-Commander Abliar**?"

"Yes, ma'am," Lafier corroborated.

"Come back in time for it," said Atosryua. "I'd like you to learn what a *real* banquet is. And don't worry, **Roibomoiass Abliar** — singing will not be allowed. Now then, get out a **smallcraft** and send your Clerk to the **Imperial Palace**."

"Roger that, ma'am," Lafier saluted.

Atosryua almost saluted back, but dropped her hand midway through and started talking to somebody offscreen. "**Roibomoiass Abliar**, I don't know why, but **Senior Staff Officer Sobash** has some words of counsel for you. Don't let **Deca-Commander Ecryua** be the smallcraft's **Skipper**. That's not an order, but something to note."

Lafier looked at Ecryua. She was expressionless, yet Lafier somehow got the feeling she was indignant.

"Understood, ma'am," said Lafier.

This time, Atosryua did return the salute. Then she disappeared.

"This is a job for our **Messenger**," Lafier told Ecryua. "**Gnomboch**, ready the **smallcraft** and escort **Raicléc Sazoïr Lynn** to the **Imperial Palace**."

"Yes, ma'am!" The **Linewing's** knees were shaking. He must have been nervous.

Perhaps she should have entrusted the task to someone else, but she'd already issued the order. If she changed her mind now, she might inadvertently wound him. Besides, even a child could fly a mere smallcraft. She was confident that once **Gnomboch** equipped the **control gauntlet**, he'd grow calm again.

“Well then, Jint, I’ll see you later.” Before sending out her **Clerk**, she checked how her **Messenger** was doing one more time. “I wish you luck in battle,” she let slip.

Thankfully, the trip to the **Imperial Palace** wasn’t so bad. *Gnomboch*’s piloting was definitely stiff, but all the less dangerous for it, and they entered the **pier** through the guidance of *Blyséc Rüébéir* (Imperial Palace Space Traffic Control).

“Thank you, **Linewing**,” said Jint, before disembarking from the smallcraft.

The pier door opened, and a **personal transporter** came for him, aboard which was someone he hadn’t been expecting.

“Mr. Samson!” said Jint, not believing his eyes. “What are you doing here?”

Samson was supposed to be at the **Hyde Countdom**. Though he had become a **servant vassal** of Jint’s, the bond they had forged aboard the **assault ship** *Basrogrh* hadn’t changed much at all.

“The **Empire** strongly insisted I be here,” said Samson. “I brought documents from the **Countdom**. Well, I guess it didn’t have to be me specifically, but I thought I’d come to humbly behold the noble countenance of mine Lord. Got the **magistrate**’s permission and everything.”

“But what’s all this about...?”

There were two others aboard the **transporter** alongside Samson. One was the chamberlain driving it, *Béicébríac*. The other looked like a Lander bureaucrat.

“It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Lonh-*Dreur Häider*,” said the Lander politely. “My name is Barowz, and I’m a *Bauchimiäch Gaicec Scofarimér saudonir* (Chancellor’s Office Ambassadorial Agency councilor).

“Nice to meet you, *Saudonic* (Councilor).” Jint looked at Samson and Barowz’s face, wondering which one of them would do the explaining.

“I apologize for my impropriety.” It seemed Barowz would be the one. “By all rights, we should request you pass your eyes over all of the documents, Lonh-*Dreur Häider*, but regrettably we couldn’t manage it all in time that way, so we implemented what measures we could implement without Your Excellency’s consultation. I ask for your forgiveness.”

“I don’t mind at all, but...” Jint thought it strange. “Why are you in such a hurry, sir?”

“First, if you could,” said Barowz, inviting him aboard the **transporter**.

“Mr. Samson,” Jint whispered, “what are these documents you’ve brought along.”

“Oh, I brought everything. Including top secret stuff. You kept us waiting for ages. Though thanks to that, I got to drink stuff you can’t get outside *Lacmhacarh*, so it’s not like I was hurting.”

“You were waiting for me?”

“Surely you must understand, *Lonh-Dreur Haider*. We simply cannot disclose the information in top secret documents without Your Excellency’s permission,” said Barowz. “That is why we brought Your Excellency here.”

“I see.”

To be frank, he’d have liked it if they just did as they pleased. While Jint loved his home star system of Hyde, he had little to no interest in the **territory-nation** known as the **Countdom of Hyde**. To him, it was a legal fiction that supported him monetarily and allowed him to throw the occasional banquet. And he was far more interested in the banquet Atosryua would hold at The Stylet anyway.

If they’d just asked, I would’ve granted them all the license to act in the world, he grumbled inwardly. That being said, he was happy to be reunited with Samson. *I know, I should invite Samson to the banquet. I’m sure he’d like meeting back up with old acquaintances, and there’s no way Atosryua’s stingy enough to object to the guest list going up by one. Senior Staff Officer Sobash will be thrilled too, probably.*

“Disclose to whom, though?” Jint chose to forget about the banquet for the time being.

“The Hania Federation’s Ambassador Teen,” replied Barowz.

“A Federation ambassador?” Jint was even more confused now. Could they be trying to cede the **Countdom** to the enemy? That was unthinkable. Hyde was too far from the Federation.

“The Hania Federation has agreed to a plan to be absorbed into the Empire. In fact, the plan is already underway,” said Barowz.

“Uh, I don’t mean to be untoward, but...”

“Put simply, the Federation’s making the same choice the Hyde System did,” said Samson.

“Please, hold on. What do you mean it’s already underway?” Jint was taken aback, to say the least.

“The **Star Forces** are on the move to disarm the Federation and seize its territory,” stated Barowz nonchalantly. “Though the plan is still in its preparatory stages. Before initializing the plan proper, we would like to use the **Countdom of Hyde**’s past and statistical data as reference.”

“You’re using the **Countdom** as reference...? But Hyde can’t be the only star system that’s surrendered.”

“True, but few have surrendered in exchange for being incorporated intact as a **territory-nation**. The **Countdom of Hyde** is the newest example of such a thing.”

"I see." Jint's feelings were a tad mixed. "So, does this mean a great number of **landworlder grandees** are about to appear?"

"No," said Barowz, shaking his head. "Not a great number. That aside, it is true that several **landworlders** who hadn't even been **imperial citizens** before becoming **grandees** are soon to be with us. It appears Mr. Ambassador wishes to know whether that's possible, and if it is possible, how the grandees' houses ought to be administered."

I think maybe I can already head back, mused Jint. All that was being asked of him was permission to disclose information. If someone wanted to know about the Countdom of Hyde, he had but to say "Here you go, all the documents you want," and his role in this would be over. Jint had no intention of concealing anything.

"Depending on how things play out, we may be forced to visit the Federation," said Samson.

"Me? The Federation?" said Jint, slightly panicked. "Please, wait a minute!"

"Don't fret, laddie. I won't let my Lord come to harm. I'll go in your stead." He thumped his chest gallantly. "Come to think of it, I've never been to a world outside the Empire."

"Me neither," said Jint. "Well, apart from how my home world used to be outside the Empire."

"I've never been outside the Empire either," said Barowz.

"Then let's all go!" said Samson, chuckling.

"Umm, thanks, but I'll abstain," said Jint hurriedly. He wanted to remain on the *Flicaubh*. Which was to say, he wanted to remain by Lafier's side.

Eventually, the **transporter** rolled into an area with a different feel to it. The walls of the corridors leading up to this place bore imagery of prairies and forests and the like, but here they were adorned with richly colored abstract patterns. This was the space given to the Hania Federation as a diplomatic division.

It was ironic to think a foreign country's territory would lie in the deepest recesses of the **Empire**. Even Hanian guard soldiers were here. They were, however, deliberately cut off from the flow of information. One couldn't even so much as connect to the **compucrystal net** using their **wristgear**. That was why they had had to carry the documents by hand.

At the far end of this foreign land lurking within the **Imperial Palace** was a bronzed door, beyond which lay Ambassador Teen's office. Upon dismounting the **transporter**, Barowz walked at the head of the trio, leading the way for Jint and Samson.

"You have my sincerest gratitude for coming," said Ambassador Teen, the man of the office. "I stand humbled by your presence."

Jint and Samson likewise greeted him in accordance with formal etiquette. Jint sat in the seat suggested by the Ambassador. Next to him was Samson, who was answering the Ambassador's questions. As Jint listened, he once again wondered whether it wasn't all right if he just headed back.

At first blush, the Ambassador seemed quite ardent and keen to know, but Jint got the impression that was all on the surface. Once Samson had finished explaining, Ambassador Teen made a big show of his gratitude. "Wow, I learned a great deal, thanks to you."

"What star system will you be receiving, Your Excellency?" asked Jint.

"Who, me?" Teen smiled a hard-to-read smile. "I don't plan on becoming a **grandee**. I wouldn't be a grandee for the world — ahem, pardon me. In any case, all I want out of my remaining years is to build a house someplace warm with some nice scenery and paint."

"Is that so? I would have guessed—"

"You thought I looked like I want to be called a **marquess** or a **count**?"

"Yes," Jint admitted.

"Some of the people who hold the keys to making this plan a political reality do desire the status of a **grandee**, and I needed the **Empire's** firm promise in order to convince them," he explained. "Now that the conferral of their **noble ranks** is in sight, it appears they've suddenly begun to feel uneasy, and they wish to learn about your home's experiences. If they get bent out of shape at this late hour, a state of affairs that would be unfortunate not only for us but for the Empire might spring up. That is why I had Your Excellency come here. I must say, I am most embarrassed about all this."

"I see." Jint now understood that to Teen, this was somebody else's problem and not his, which went to explain his general attitude.

"Now, while this won't nearly suffice to thank you for Your Excellency's kindness, as a small token of our deepening amity, I have reserved you a seat to a nice meal," said the Ambassador. "If you would be amenable, I would very much like to have a taste of the cuisine of my native land, which will soon be part of the **Empire**."

Jint glanced at the timetable on his **wristgear**. If he left now, he'd probably make it back in time for The Stylet. While he wasn't disinclined to partake of the much-vaunted Hanian cuisine, it couldn't win out against the sheer appeal of a banquet put on by the **Baroness of Febdash**. "Ah, I thank you for thinking of me, Mr. Ambassador, but I'm currently in military service."

"A shame." Teen made sure to look disappointed. "Your Excellency must be busy. But please, I would be gratified if you take us up on our offer sometime before you leave the **capital**."

“Thank you very much.”

Unaware of the banquet, Samson looked less than pleased by this. But it seemed he didn’t intend to object to his Lord in another’s presence. And Jint knew he’d thank him later. After all, while Hania’s food culture was said to be excellent, it was also said that they had no decent booze to speak of.

Jint bade the Ambassador adieu, excited to get away. It was when Barowz and Ambassador Teen exchanged words of parting that the alarm sounded.

“What’s going on, sir?” Jint asked the Ambassador.

“I don’t know.” Teen looked at Barowz, a bewildered look on the Ambassador’s face.

“I don’t know, either.” Barowz was just as perplexed. “This isn’t an **Empire alarm**. It’s your nation’s alarm, is it not?”

“That is true.” Teen picked up the archaic telephone on his desk, but nobody came on the line.

Since their **wristgears** were lacking their communication functionality at the moment, all that the three Empire men could do was look on. Then the door opened, and in stepped a Hanian guard soldier, white in the face. He and the Ambassador traded a few words in a tongue Jint didn’t comprehend.

“What’s wrong?” asked Barowz.

“I’m not sure, but your nation’s soldiers, they’re...”

But the Ambassador didn’t finish that sentence. There was no need. The soldiers behind the disturbance had arrived. It was the honor guard corps. They were indispensable when it came to highly formal ceremonies, but they were also elites tasked with protecting the **Empress’s** person.

“Pardon us for imposing, Mr. Ambassador,” said the commanding officer courteously, “but Your Excellency’s diplomatic immunity has been revoked. We will also be shutting down this division.”

“May I be allowed to ask what happened?” asked the Ambassador, whose face had turned pale.

“Your nation’s fleet has invaded the **Clybh Monarchy**,” he replied coldly. “Said fleet is headed straight for the **capital**.”

Afterword

It's me, MORIOKA.

Are there still people waiting for the next book? Are there still people who even remember the series? I'm extremely doubtful, yet here I am, with BANNER OF THE STARS IV.

Originally, I was going to write down the reasons why the publication gap between books has gotten so big, as a way to apologize, but it always came across as mere excuses — which is because they *are* just excuses — and it seemed it'd get too long for readers to slog through anyway, so I'll spare you.

To those of you I kept waiting, I sincerely apologize. One more thing — as those of you who read the volume will be aware, it ended rather abruptly. I'm sorry about that, too.

Now then, it's time for war.

Of course, the galaxy has been at war for the duration of the series, but unfortunately, Lafier has been too low-ranking for a large-scale perspective, so the war has been nothing more than backdrop. I depicted a battle in BANNER I, but a battle is different from a war. From here on out, I need to make the war itself the “lead role” for a little while.

Every battle up until now was just a preliminary skirmish. The Empire has been relatively laidback, too, but starting now, it can no longer afford to be. If I were to put it in blurb-y terms... *A cruel destiny lies in wait for the Empire!* (Though I'm the one who made it that way.)

When I wrote CREST, I dreamt up the story that'd follow if they let me continue the series, but it was only a rough outline. Had it been more detailed, the gaps between books would be a whole lot smaller.

To me, writing a series this long is like bringing to life the fossil of a creature I can't quite wrap my head around. Back when all that was running through my head was “it'd be nice if I could write it,” I thought I had the whole beast in the palm of my hand. But now I realize how enormous it is. It's as though I thought I was excavating a Compsognathus, only to dig up Argentinosaurus-sized bones. And putting meat and flesh on these bones is an exciting prospect! When I squat by the giant beast's skeleton, I often realize the way the bones have been put together is off somehow, and sometimes, when I'm fleshing it out, I come to understand a particular bone isn't big enough. Fixing those things is rather fun. But it is worrying how much

time it takes.

To compensate for this volume's abrupt ending, the assembly of the skeleton of the next volume is coming along nicely. I suppose what I'm getting at is... I'd like to be able to write "I managed to finish the book without keeping you very long" in the next afterword. Of course, my real dream would have been to be able to write "I managed to finish the book without keeping you very long *this time, too.*"

In any case, I'm planning for the next volume to feature the climax of the first half of the rough outline that I dreamt up. I'll keep hoping those dreams come true.

Nov-04

Selected Glossary, Part 5

The following glossary is a curated version of the working document used throughout the translation process. As such, some portions of it are arranged topically rather than alphabetically. The “complete” glossary is a substantially larger document, spanning many dozens of pages of Baronh words, their English translations, and explanatory translator’s notes. Further selections from the glossary will be made available in the future, as the series progresses.

Note that true Baronh does not have capitalization, as it is written in the ath script.

General Glossary: Nouns (Part 2 of 2)

- Lodaïronn: writ of appointment; written in the name of the Military Administration Director.
- Matbrah: twin wings.
- Mauscrh: pocket.
- Méc: whistle.
- Mhlahm: pendant.
- Mimabiac: compiler; during the City-Ship Era, the position that carried out the central roles involving recordkeeping.
- Muchec: season; i.e., a sports season.
- Muïc: winter.
- Murrautec: place of origin.
- Nactimec: advance reservation, appointment.
- Nacébriac: chamberlain guard; reserve soldiers that serve as the Emperor's armed chamberlains.
- Nadaugec: beloved child.
- Nataimecoth: investigation, search.
- Néc: woman.
- Niglac: national crest, imperial flag, or crest banner.
- Nirautech: (Abh) capital.
- Nisec: shop.
- Nochec: dragon.
- Nœc: younger sister.
- Noüonn: (a) beauty.
- Nüic: ear.
- Obdatycirh: main compucrystal.
- Obœtec: transparent visor.
- Odh: self.
- Oll: song.
- Onfiriach: vending machine.
- Onh: blockhead.
- Onüaréiléc: teacher bot.
- Onuhociach: automaton.
- Osnéc: girl, young lady, or younger sister.
- Pac: place.
- Parh: rose.
- Patfocechoth: gangway send-off; for people of high rank.
- Patmesaïhoth: gangway welcome; for people of high rank. The ship commander introduces himself and the ship's highest-ranking starpilots.
- Pérh digr: rainbow butterfly.

Poch: point, controls (buttons/keys).

Ptarhoth: fusion.

Ptusarhoth: contact; an encounter.

Ptusarsac: contact range.

Pÿac: birthroom; a room with an artificial womb.

Racnébh: base canteen.

Radéüragh: review, screening.

Radéüragh bucragr: starpilot aptitude screening.

Ragrhoth: investigation, exploration.

Ragriac: investigator, explorer.

Rahyriac: surveyor; a device for detecting what the naked eye or *frocragh* cannot.

Raicecoth: drinking.

Raich: pure white; also, a breed of cat.

Raïchacarth: showdown, clash.

Raïchoth; checkpoint.

Raicporhoth: defensive warfare.

Raicporiac: defensive fleet.

Raiczach: senior, as in the Japanese word “sempai.” It can also refer to one thing preceding another more generally.

Rainibh: phantom flame(s).

Raisriamrhoth: state of emergency.

Ramgocoth: wandering.

Ramh: an honorific equivalent to the Japanese “—sama.”

Translator’s Note: When Jint went under the alias of Sye Jint, in Baronh he was referred to by the staff as *Saïc Ramh Ghinter*.

Ramzaich: daybreak.

Rasbochoth: relative speed.

Raugrthoasairh: exploration officer.

Réltérh: apple brandy.

Rémdagssoth: banishment, exile.

Rénbonh: commodity, good(s).

Renéc: she.

Rénhaich: a menu or list of goods.

Résaimh: mane.

Rétgacoth: surrender; the “t” is silent.

Reurec: fee, charge(s).

Reurec: clear soup; specifically, suimono, a Japanese-style soup.

Reutecoth: splitting off, detachment.

Rïaic: match (as in a game).

Rïaic dorér: (horseback) joust(ing); a microgravity game for two.

Ribrasiac: stungun.

Rihoth: job.

Rihothaïcoth: career change.

Rilbic: navigation, sailing.

Rinagh: silver or gray hair.

Rinaisec: news, notification.

Rinméc: apple cider.

Rinoc: region, (plot of) land.

Rinusiatic: (news) article, account.

Riöpoth: smoked thigh.

Ripoth: breast.

Rire: confirmation, check.

Rirragh: report, information.

Rirssoth: entry (i.e. in a form or log), filling in.

Riüérh: rules and regulations.

Rizairh: rocket larkspur.

Robiach: nuisance, annoyance.

Robuchoth: revolt, rebellion; the largest in the Empire's history was the Robuchoth Ghimrÿar, instigated by the landworlders that made up the majority of the troops in the then-extant landworld military of the Star Forces.

Rodaure: lava pine.

Röenh: jade; can also mean "kingfisher."

Rogrh: (red-banded sand) wasp.

Roiragac: attitude control system.

Roizabairh Rirragr: Spare Information Collection Room; see also *Zabairh Rirragr*, "Information Collection Room."

Ronarobhoth: The Convivium; the grandest feast in the Empire, held annually at the (temporarily open) Imperial Palace.

Ronrébh: sand lawn.

Ropec: lemon. (Translator's note: the original Japanese word used archaic spelling to avoid the normally-used-for-loanword spelling of "lemon.")

Rortec: wyne. Translator's note: the original Japanese text was written in such a way to avoid the English loanword "wine."

Rosgiac: decanter.

Roth: outside.

Rüaboriac: watchguard fleet.

Rüarhéüc: horizon; specifically, a horizon viewed over land (as opposed to the sea).

Ruc: repair dock.

Rugaigh: fried mountain mutton with fruit sauce.

Rugh: (firing) range; as in, within shooting distance.

Ruhyrh: flotilla lessee.

Ruhyrbach: flotilla lessee's seat.

Rÿac: (one's) future or path in life.

Rybelaïc: composite art.

Rycmac: ravine, brink.

Ryrdüac: carbon crystal fiber; fibers used in many things, from asteroid hauling to ropes.

Ryrh: fort, stronghold.

Sabosiac: eco-engineer; in charge of creating an ecosystem on a terraformed world.

Sacochoth: registration.

Sacoth: shopping, purchased goods.

Sacunsosiac: recordkeeper; during the City-Ship Era, the Abhs chosen from among the Calyc clan that compiled the history of the Abh. Most weren't recordkeepers for very long, but there were some who excelled at it enough to do it for their whole lives.

Sagaich: herb-grilled food.

Sagaich soclyzr: herb-grilled lamb.

Sagh: jet (thruster); as in, a propulsion system.

Saibec cimecotr: military secret barrier (in the same sense of a "language barrier").

Saibh: fang.

Saic: engine (system).

Saiceruc: Eurasian jay.

Saidac: arm.

Saigéth: keyboard.

Saigh: key.

Saighoth: password; literally, "key word."

Saigh cimena: passcode.

Saigh daimhatr: EM wave crest-key.

Saigh daimhatr haita: general-access EM wave crest-key; a key that activates when scanning a wristgear's registered EM wave crest-key with the registered crest of the target.

Saimlogh: book.

Sainemésghoth: crime prevention.

Sairhoth: wrath.

Saïriac: egg.

Saïrhoth: return, repatriation.

Sall: face.

Salygh: transporter.

Samh: (annihilation) reactor furnace.

Sampyre: hat, headpiece, crown.

Sanhaïcoth: judgement, inference.

Sanslymh: bank.

Saobec: wall.

Saporgac: commence battle.

Sarann: mother.

Saréüc: cooking, cuisine.

Sareucenonn: clever one.

Sath: base of the neck.

Sathoth: victory.

Satucoth: mathematics.

Satyrh: liquid soap.

Saurh: family.

Sauzec / sauzz: number (as opposed to numeral), amount.

Scalych: serving table.

Scérh: accounting.

Sciadéc: spirit (alcohol).

Scofarimiac: delegate, envoy.

Scunic: ship name.

Scuriac: creator.

Sébonh: creature.

Sépyrh: smokescreen.

Seloemecoth: obligation(s).

Sériac: shining one.

Sétuch: lightning, thunder.

Seusecoth: competition, match.

Sibonh: clothing.

Sibonn: creature.

Sicféc: efficacy, effect.

Sidoc: yesterday.

Sineucec: glass (cup).

Sitamronh: bio-park; a combination zoo and botanical garden.

Sioc: today.

Sitonh: (emotional) bond.

Sizec: injury, damage.

Sizeluce: injury, wound.

Slacélach: warriors.

Snacoth: lesson.

Snymhec rurur: crane mince.

Sobiac: resupplier.

Soclyzz: lamb.

Socrh: heart (figurative).

Sodmh: child.

Sodmronh: (microgravity) (baby) garten; a spherical, artificial planetoid where Abh babies learn how to use their frocragh spatiosensory perception. (Translator's note: The "d" is silent.)

Sodmronh (nosotr): (microgravity) garten; spaces or facilities for adults to enjoy microgravity.

Sodmronh rozasotr: (microgravity) babyroom; a babygarten in room form.

Sofaire: damage, destruction.

Sogh: planet.

Sohyth: lock gate; a hatch in the barrier wall separating the vacuum of space from the pressurized area.

Soïc: tea.

Soïc ala: green tea.

Soïc asa: black tea.

Soïc rachpanr: citrus tea; amber-colored and bittersweet.

Soïmhoth: condolence(s).

Soïreurec: excess charge.

Son béhynh: this week.

Soprhoth: rationing, distribution.

Sorh: (a) time.

Sormh: jumpsuit.

Soséc / sosiác : shoes.

Sotfairh: theory.

Soth: thing (intangible).

Sotÿac: (information) terminal; an apparatus that links up to the compucrystal net.

Spariac: shipsbooker; a staff member of the Casobérlach Merchant Ship Company. The point of contact for selling off ships.

Spaudec: department.

Spéch: ring, band; refers to rings of portals.

Spéruch: command personnel; members of a headquarters or command center, e.g., the Commander-in-Chief, staff officers, adjutants, etc.

Spodéc: bureau.

Spodéc Bilr: Traffic Bureau.

Spodéc Bilr (Arocr): (Capital) Traffic Bureau; the government office that gives the countless manmade planetoids in the imperial capital registration numbers to best manage their traffic. The only body that has a grasp of the ever-changing and relative positions of the structures on Lacmhacarrh.

Spodéc Rirragr: Information Bureau; a bureau attached to Military Command. Gathers intelligence on the enemy.

Saimh Spodéc Rirragr: Director-General of the Information Bureau.

Spodéc Rüébilr: Spaceroute Bureau; the organization that pays non-military survey ships to search for portals.

Sréragh: fork-spoon. (Translator's note: in order to avoid the English loanword "spork," this is literally "stabbing spoon.")

Srusfaugac: workstech(s); engineers in charge of orbital tower construction and the like.

Sryrec: glide-aid; a tool landworlders can use to facilitate locomotion under microgravity conditions.

Ssorh: sector.

Ssorh Bandacer: Central (Sector); the center of the Milky Way Portal-Belts. Space-time particles gushing from countless “volcanoes” rush in dense streams toward the outer edges, so it’s not feasible for space-time bubbles to enter this sector. It is also sometimes used to mean the first seven portal rings (where all four enemy nations and seven of the Empire’s eight monarchies reside, and where portals are more densely packed than otherwise).

Ssorh Cairaza: The Unexplored Sector; what the outer rings (8-11) of the Milky Way Portal-Belts used to be called.

Styc: wound, chip.

Such: mouth.

Suréc: future.

Surepuch: event horizon.

Surguc: coffee.

Surhoth: entering a store.

Sygh: scrivenbrush; written as “pointed brush” to avoid the English loanword “pen.” (Translator’s note: these might be slightly different from the pens you and I know.)

-tamh: state of (suffix).

Tar liannaic: *ath* workbook.

Thapérhoth: conversation; see also *thapére*, “to talk.”

Ticrebh: carpet grass; grass genetically engineered to be short and not to wither when trod upon. Also allows small flowers to bloom.

Tirec naumr: peach juice.

Tirec mlémr: grape juice.

Tlach: temperature.

Tloségac: rescue ship; a ship for rescuing escapees.

Tobiac: orbital quarters; referring to both normal orbital quarters, and to a kind of facility that can attach itself to a ship whenever its crew can’t leave it (for whatever reason).

(Rüé) Tusaic: (imperial) envoy.

Tych: cup.

Teurh: fruit juice.

Teurh lachbanr: orange juice.

Üabaiss: hall (as in a spacious room).

Üabœdec: memory.

Üac: man.

Üadrhoth: dance.

Üadrhoth sathotr: dance of victory; the show of force conducted by the Star Forces after having taken the skies of a landworld.

Üalodh Rÿazonr: Director of Military Command Headquarters.

Üalodh Bhosorr: Military Administration Director; the person under whose name writs of appointment (lodaironn) are issued and

delivered.

Üalodh Gaicer Scofarimér: Ambassadorial Agency Director.

Üalodh Flisorr: Director Secretary; a post in charge of the issuance of court rank diplomas.

Üalodiach: Supreme Command Base; the highest institution in the military, located in the Imperial Palace.

Üamh: carriage ship, horse; a kind of intrasystem sailing ship that's homonymous with "horse." Can be owned by private individuals or families.

Üamrthoth: gravity control.

Üamriac: gravity control system.

Üanch: young man.

Üariac: propulsor gun; guns used for propulsion in microgravity conditions.

Üass: head (of a group); also a suffix (see the Star Forces ranks).

Üass béicaiberér: head chamberlain.

Üass paunér: onboard-ship servicing head; the head of the NCCs that service the onboard (intrasystem) ships.

Üass Casarér: Chief of Staff; the highest-ranked staff officer in a fleet. For sub-fleets and squadrons, this would be the senior staff officer.

Üass Drocér: Communications Chief.

Üass fénnér: head handmaid.

Üass Fénnér Lartnér Casna Clybr: Head Handmaid of the First Princess of Clybh.

Üass gaicer: trading company head.

Üass Sacunsoser: Chief of Records; during the City-Ship Era, the chief executive of the Records Division.

Ubaireca: place of (one's) origin.

-ubariac: person who hails from (suffix).

Üéch: portal-sea.

Üécragh: size.

Üéfthoth: pursuit battle.

Ultamh: shooting.

Usaimh: reconnaissance.

Usarh: brother(s).

Useriac: immigrant(s); see also *usere*, "to immigrate/emigrate."

Üsiac: hovercar.

Ybh: sea, lake.

ÿinh: bombing incident in space.

Yzathoth: first time piloting.

Zabairh Rirragr: Information Collection Room; during the City-Ship Era, the duty post that managed information such as the city-ship's navigation log. One was located in the center of the Calyc clan

residential quarters, while four others, the Spare Information Collection Rooms, were stationed elsewhere on the ship, to be guarded by other clans.

Zeucec: forehead.

Zobairh: mooring basin.

Zocrh: deck; the “rh” is silent.

Zocrh déür: garden deck; decks of ships such as supply ships that have been refurbished as gardens. Not popular with Landers, who mostly see them as pale imitations.

Zocrh hocsatr: (space-time) mobile mine deck; the place on ships such as patrol ships where antimatter is funneled to the magnetic confinement vessels of the mines. It’s necessary, for safety reasons, to depressurize before opening it.

Zocrh paunelacr: onboard ship holding deck; the holding deck of onboard *paunh* (intrasystem ships).

Zocrh sair: engine deck.

-zøech: period/hour of (prefix); e.g., zøech lona ten o’clock.

Zøech socna: dry season.

Zøech timena: rainy season.



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